

# Editorial

The success of populist parties was the overriding theme of the European elections in May 2019. The „Refugee Crisis“ that began in 2015 brought the dark side of the migration issue into the center of public debate in many European countries. In one member country after another, “right-wing populist” parties scored major victories with the mobilization of voters, who perceived the mass migration from non-European regions as a cultural and/or social-economic threat. A systematic evaluation of voting and survey data in the EU-countries undertaken in the lead-up to the elections indicated that a clear increase in the number of “Euro-sceptics” on the right-wing of the political party spectrum was to be expected.<sup>1</sup> It was on them, that the attention was focused from those who feared the weakening of the European integration project and its central ideas.

In the public debate, populism appeared all too often as a monolithic block, where deviations receive little notice. Even in academic discussions, the debate strongly focused on “right-wing populism”, whereas “left-wing populism” received far less attention, even to the point of it being denied as a phenomenon at all. However, in the last few years, the number of analyses has noticeably risen, in which right and left “populism” are given equal attention. These studies examine the differences, similarities, the changing relationships, as well as the dynamic that emerges from within the European (and non-European) party systems in its attempts to determine social, economic, and cultural conditions.

On the occasion of the European elections, the authors of this special issue address this theme in various ways. Cas Mudde is a Dutch political party researcher currently working in the United States. His work in the past on populism has garnered international attention. He opens the discussion with a current stock-taking of the situation that intends to both order things by definition, while also attempting to fathom the relationships amongst the forces concerned. Where he holds populism to be a “thin ideology”, which plays off a homogenized concept of the Volk (i.e. the common people) fighting against the clichéd conception of a singular corrupt elite, he succeeds at the same time in detailing the multiple connections of this core construction with ideological elements of various historic origins: with nativism and authoritarianism (right-wing populism), with various forms of Socialism and Social-Democratic thinking (left-wing populism), and with programmatic elements from disparate ideological traditions in “idiosyncratic” forms. Furthermore, he develops an overall interpretation of the phenomenon, in which he links its appearance “with structural social changes” that cause a fundamental shift in European politics. So, while “cognitive mobilization and

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1 Cf. European Parliament, prepared by KANTAR Public, European Elections 2019. Report on the developments in the political landscape (April 18, 2019), Brussels 2019.

growing inequality” lead “to a people that is increasingly dissatisfied and more strongly ready to articulate it”, at the same time, the main-stream political parties grow more closely together on economic and supra-national issues, while their voter mobilization efforts have become more inefficient. The populist actors are much more skilled in using newer social media in which to better organize, recruit personnel, and operate propaganda-like throughout the political landscape.

Where Cas Mudde accounts for a bundle of structural factors that explain, with various degrees of effectiveness, the success of populist parties in every European country, the Bremen political scientist Philip Manow emphasizes the key role of a social-economic configuration for an explanation of the success of the various forms of populisms in different European regions – in contrast to an interpretation emphasizing cultural conflicts („cosmopolitan“ versus „communitarianism“).<sup>2</sup> In making his central argument, two distinctions are at play: first, that between economies which, on the one hand, have come under pressure as a consequence of globalization – above all due to the cross-border exchange of goods – and, on the other hand, those in which open borders have meant a problem for their workforces. Second, the distinction between welfare states where, on the one side, there are those relatively open to immigration, while on the other side, there are others that see social security help as exclusively limited to those who already have employment. The possibilities for left-wing populists are best in countries where businesses are predominately oriented towards satisfying domestic demand and where it is very difficult for immigrants to attain access to social welfare help. On the other hand, right-wing populist success is most likely in places where the economies tend to be strong export powers and where access to social welfare assistance is relatively easy.

In order to prove the explanatory power of these connections, Manow, in an enormous effort, makes use of an impressive fund of material which he has re-worked into a statistically based overview. The results, for the most part, seem to indicate that from a large share of the comparative research emphasizing cultural factors, these factors actually work together in a complex manner with social-economic mechanisms. Nevertheless, even here, one has to allow for a wide array of deviations, since the various types of political economies and social welfare state systems described by Manow, are, even within their own states, very differentiated at the regional level. Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe, political scientist at the Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) at the Technical University Dresden, demonstrates this for Italy whose political party system, since the great crash in the mid-1990s, has turned out to be an experimental laboratory for populism like no other in Europe. Here, for example, the economic parameters

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2 Cf. first of all Wolfgang Merkel, *Kosmopolitismus versus Kommunitarismus: Ein neuer Konflikt in der Demokratie*. In: Philipp Harfst/Ina Kubbe/Thomas Poguntke (Eds.), *Parties, Governments, and Elites. The Comparative Study of Democracy*, Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 9–23.

in the Lombardy region are entirely different than that in, say, Calabria. In addition to that, the right-wing populist Lega party has undergone a transformation in recent years: from a defender of the north Italian propertied classes against the predatory south, to a movement that has drummed up sympathy south of Rome and finds a genuine resonance among the people there. And, on the other hand, the label “left-wing populism” fits the Five-Star-Movement, at best, only in part.

In his election analyses, Gilles Ivaldi classifies this political chameleon amongst the populists of the “center”, that is, to those formations that cannot be associated with any great clarity to either the right or the left. Ivaldi, who teaches in Nizza as a CNRS researcher, presents in his article one of the first examinations of the European elections from May 2019 derived from the results of the European Election Studies. The basis for this study comes largely from surveys – standardized forms for every EU member state – that were carried out in the weeks immediately after the election, in order to compare determining factors in voting preferences. According to Ivaldi, the „Globalization Loser Theory“ is only partially confirmed, and even then only when a differentiation is made between the disadvantages that can be concretely measured now, as opposed to what is felt the disadvantages may be in the future. In addition, the populist choice appears to be embedded in a complex fabric of social, economic, political, and cultural conflicts that tend to vary, depending on which form of populism is considered. Common factors that emerged in the study appear to be: an attitude toward the process of European integration that ranges from sceptical to outright rejection, a critical judgement of the exercise of “democracy” in the EU, and extremely limited support for democratic institutions, including those at the nation-state level.

This special edition closes with an article that connects the populism concept with the extremist concept, although in a rather specific manner. The political scientists Tom Mannewitz (Technical University Chemnitz) and Isabelle-Christine Panreck (London School of Economics and Political Science, from May 2020 on Hannah Arendt Institute, Dresden) test the question of the system-transformative potential of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in Germany. Here, they take a critical look back at the indicators, which the American political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have systematized<sup>3</sup> (3) – in order to ascertain, on the basis of political behaviour, the risks of an authoritarian transformation within a democratic constitutional state. In particular, the main topics concern: 1) The rejection of the rules of democracy (or half-hearted compliance with them); 2) The denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; 3) The toleration of, or encouragement towards, violence, and; 4) the willingness to restrict the civil liberties of opponents, including the media. The wide-spectrum of research material has been taken mostly from party and election programmes

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3 Steven Levitsky/Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York 2018.

and from numerous quotations of leading politicians from both the federal and state levels. On top of that, numerous official investigations have been evaluated that have since lead to speculation on the constitutional loyalty of the party. Plus, even if one is not inclined to follow each conclusion of the authors, this article is an important stimulation for calling into question the anti-democratic potential of populist and extremist movements.

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