

The Rise of Populism and Implications on European Integration

Jiayang Zhao*

Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington DC, USA

*Corresponding author: jzhao52@gwu.edu

Abstract. Since 1990, populism has become increasingly important in European politics. It is often associated with Euroscepticism and exclusionism. The topic of this paper is the negative relationship between populism and European integration in Europe in recent years. This paper aims to explore what obstacles populism has caused to the process of European integration by observing the ideas and policies of populist politicians and political parties, combined with the past research of many scholars. After describing three aspects, this paper concludes that populism is hindering the progress of European integration by increasing public suspicion of regional cooperation organizations, encouraging exclusive socio-economic policies, and emphasizing national identity rather than European identity. This trend may also continue in the foreseeable future, giving consideration to the current European political and economic situation.

Keywords: Populism, European Integration, Euroscepticism, European Politics.

1. Introduction

The connection between populism and European integration can be traced back to the 1990s. During this period, populism ushered in the third and largest wave after the Second World War. Austria, Germany, Belgium, and Denmark have their populist political parties [1]. The original Populist Party was born from exclusivity, which coexisted with anti-immigration policies and anti-cultural diversity demands [1]. After entering the 21st century, regional cooperation organizations in Europe, such as the European Union, have become one of the core issues of exclusive populism and have attracted the attention of populists in the next two decades. The research of this paper is based on the manifestation of populism in the political life of European countries in the past decade to observe the specific implications caused by populist thoughts or policies. In this process, this paper attempts to describe how populist beliefs or policies exert similar or different influences in different examples, including Western European countries and Eastern European countries in the traditional sense. While comparing these examples, this paper aims to summarize a universal influence to describe the Enlightenment of populism on the issue of European integration.

2. The Concepts and Origin of Populism in Europe

The political science community often defines populism as an ideology that emphasizes identity differentiation. Populists divide the known society into two opposite parts: an elite class possessing strong political, economic, or social power, including relatively few people forming fixed circles, a common class lacking such power, including many people and presenting social status significantly lower than the elite class [2]. This way of narration is the key to understanding populism. Populists naturally believe that elites value private interests more than public ones and will do their best to maintain their privileged societal position [2]. And the people is the central part of this society, playing a significant role in production and social life. However, due to the lack of power and low political status, the people's demands are often difficult to be understood by the elite and therefore are not valued [3]. At this time, populist politicians came on stage. They appear as people's spokesmen, highly rely on public support, attack the existing elite, and try to replace it. To distinguish themselves who represent the people and the existing elites who do not care about the people, populists often adopt policies or ideas highly different from the existing elites in many aspects to prove the essential

difference between the two to the public. At the same time, it is precisely because the narrative mode of populism emphasizes identity differentiation rather than providing strategies for social transformation that it is called a "thin ideology" by the political science community [4].

The political science community still has no common consensus about when this trend of thought officially appeared in political life. Considering that the primary purpose of this paper is to link populism with European political affairs, this paper will further describe it from the perspective of European politics and avoid considering the development history of populism in other parts of the world. The idea of populism sprouted on the European political stage in the inter-war period. At that time, the far-right political parties and political groups in the politics of the Third Republic of France emphasized their opposition to the elite class occupying privileges and positions. They claimed that these elite politicians were decadent and would only waste the resources of the Republic and ignore the demands of the people [5]. Similar ideas have also appeared in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Britain, some of which have had a severe impact, while others have received little response. Populism in this period appeared only as a narrative method and did not develop into a mature political framework. After the end of the Second World War, populist political parties or political groups gradually separated from the larger group of "extreme right-wing parties" and formed their own faction [1]. From the 1950s to the 1970s, although populist political groups emerged during this period, they were small in scale and weak in strength. It was challenging to cause repercussions from the perspective of macro-political life. In the late 1980s, populist parties came to the fore in political life and developed their influence over the next 30 years. Until today, they play a decisive role in elections and public policymaking.

During these three decades of development, the positions and propositions of populists have evolved with the changes in political patterns and social balance. For example, in the late 1980s, mainstream populist parties, such as Austrian Freedom Party, Swiss People's Party, Norwegian Progress Party, and National Front in France all adhered to the core logic of exclusiveness [1]. This kind of exclusiveness simply stems from dissatisfaction with more and more immigrants—the tide of immigrants is changing the social structure within the traditional nation-state and bringing conflicts of economic rights and interests. Later, such exclusiveness developed into broader areas, such as distrust of cross-regional cooperation. In the context of European politics, the most crucial cross-regional cooperation is naturally the European Union and European integration.

3. Implication of Populism: Euroscepticism

As mentioned above, what injected vitality into the development of populism in the late 1980s and beyond was the exclusionary color of narrative from the public's perspective. In a narrow sense, this exclusionism can be summarized as a dedication to the unified concept of people and state. In a broad sense, the extension based on this basic concept includes excluding concepts such as immigration, multi-community, cultural diversity, etc. In the field of European politics, which this paper focuses on, the exclusivity of populism can be interpreted as the exclusion of international cooperation and interactive collective development while emphasizing the importance of national self-interest [6].

This logic sounds like a traditional concept unique to the far-right parties in the past and is primarily linked to conservatism. But in the context of populism, far-right parties are not the only ones holding the above ideas. Far-left populist parties also show similar exclusivity, although for different reasons. Right-wing populists are concerned about a single national tradition that must be maintained and believe it is unacceptable to change their social form by accepting external cultural factors [1]. Their more conservative political ideas also make it easier to understand their opposition to international cooperation because international cooperation means the redistribution of resources among collectives, which is likely to be detrimental to their development [7]. Left-wing populists have a slightly different perspective. Their exclusivity stems from the attack on inequality under the current social or economic system. Left-wing populists believe that inequality originates from a solidified elite, and excessive participation in international cooperation or regional integration will

magnify and strengthen this inequality until it can't be changed. Therefore, left-wing populists oppose economic integration institutions such as the eurozone and adhere to a certain degree of protectionism [7]. In other words, although left-wing and right-wing populists have different reasons for the emergence of xenophobic ideas, they show a similar core on the stage of European Politics: opposition to the process of European integration. The intensity and intensity of such opposition will vary depending on the actual situation of each country and the party's program, but the opposition itself is consistent. Therefore, it is unsurprising that today's mainstream populist parties in Europe, both left and right, have shown the spirit of Euroscepticism [8].

At the same time, as history has proved time and time again, in the face of a regional or even global economic recession, the political forces calling for a progressive and free open economy are often suppressed, while conservatives calling for trade protectionism are more likely to win the support of the public. Europe today is at such a moment. Since 2020, due to the epidemic's impact, the people at the bottom have faced a series of difficulties in increasing costs and reducing income: rising prices, reducing jobs, reducing harrowingly, and increasing regulatory policies. In such a difficult period, the antipathy to regional economic integration and hostility to the elite are more likely to expand and eventually lead to different forms of Euroscepticism.

4. Populism Negative Implications on European Integration

The concrete manifestation of the obstacles caused by populism to the process of European integration has three major perspectives. These three perspectives are political affairs, socio-economic affairs, and cultural influence. In the process of exploring these implications, Euroscepticism plays an essential role as well.

4.1 Political Aspect

The implications of populism and Euroscepticism in political affairs are institutional, questioning the operational principles and rationality of the European Union and its subordinate institutions. First, a common argument is that the EU, as a regional cooperation organization beyond national sovereignty, has concentrated too much-unrestricted power on the superstructure. This power is still expanding with the expansion of the EU. Populists often describe the power structure of the EU as a nondemocratic, authoritarian mechanism, in contrast to European national entities that are trying to improve their democratic means at this stage [9]. At the same time, populists uphold the narrative concept they maintain most of the time and believe that the EU institutions are essentially a concrete expression of the elite and are oppressing the European people's pursuit of their legitimate power under the EU framework. Secondly, as an unprecedented super sovereign political entity, the legitimacy of its executive power is also being attacked by populists. When joining the EU, each country voluntarily transferred part of its sovereignty to the EU and authorized the EU to have power over domestic legislation and law enforcement agencies in specific areas [10]. This concept of transcending the existence of state entities has been questioned in some more conservative political environments, such as Poland, Spain, and Hungary. In addition, populists also attacked the issue of European integration itself by deconstructing the EU as a legitimate tool of exploitation. In the political sense, it is difficult for weak member states to directly oppose the opinions of solid member states in the EU decision-making process. Such opposition is often not settled due to external pressure, even if there is such opposition. In this way, those countries with huge chips at the discussion stage can use their chips to force other countries to obey and formulate collective policies that are more in line with their national interests. And politically vulnerable countries need to rely on solid countries to protect their rights and interests from infringement on collective issues [9]. Even so, in the follow-up reaction caused by the euro crisis in 2014, the refugee crisis in 2016, and the Brexit of the UK in 2017, the responsibility that the alliance as a whole should bear appears to benefit some countries and hurt others.

This statement is trendy in Eastern European countries (such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary), which have traditional political differences from developed Western European countries (such as France, Germany, and Belgium). According to a public opinion survey in Poland in 2017, about 49% of the respondents expressed trust in the EU mechanism, while the other 51% disagreed. Of all the respondents, only 9% expressed "a great deal" of confidence in EU institutions [11]. The root of the Polish people's distrust of the EU, as mentioned above, comes from the worry about the excessive concentration of power and the concern about the oppression of Poland's development by the EU as a tool of exploitation [11]. At the same time, even in Western European countries that are more adapted to the western narrative style, there are also people who show similar concerns. Italian populist politics is an example. Its attack on the EU fits the inefficient development of Italy in the past two decades and blames it on the imperfection of the EU mechanism and the wrong concept of European integration [12]. Among them is Matteo Salvini, the former Italian interior minister. During his tenure as interior minister, he expressed dissatisfaction and provocation with the EU refugee policy. He believed that the relevant policies had brought too many unnecessary burdens to Italy, which had a considerable impact on Italy's society and economy [12].

Such doubts about the rationality and efficiency of the EU system weaken the EU's empirical legitimacy and further damage the EU's political authority. On the topic of empirical legitimacy of the European Union, there are many understandings in the political science community. Different interpretations have different emphases. For example, some scholars understand the EU as a regulatory agency and focus on explaining the EU's power and responsibility structure at the technical level [10]. Some scholars believe the EU is an intergovernmental organization that cannot independently assume more responsibilities beyond government cooperation [10]. Although there are different interpretations of the nature and source of legitimacy of EU institutions, most scholars agree on at least one point: the EU needs to consolidate its legitimacy by building trust and prestige in its subordinate environment (such as governments and people of all countries) and correctly exercise its power on this basis [10]. As a result, when the trust of the people and governments in the EU weakens, the legitimacy of the EU is impacted. Suppose this weakening of confidence is due to some special events, such as the fact that the EU failed to respond to the euro crisis in 2014 and the subsequent refugee crisis, the impact on legitimacy may even be very violent. The rise of populism in the European political environment exacerbated this impact. In the context of the epidemic and economic depression, populists amplified the public's dissatisfaction with the EU's operating mechanism, transferred internal economic contradictions to the EU, and accused the EU of the shortcomings of its distribution mechanism. As a result, an exclusionist ideology rooted in populism has emerged on the political level. It has hindered the EU from improving its operating mechanism and power structure, considering that such an ideology refuses to trust European integration and the EU framework.

4.2 Socio-Economic Aspect

The implications of populism and Euroscepticism in socio-economic affairs focus on two main topics: anti-immigration and protectionism. It is not difficult to give examples of the apparent positions of populist actors on these two topics and their efforts to promote these two policies. On the issue of opposing immigration, the Danish People's Party hold a firm attitude. The party cited the historical tradition of Denmark and pointed out that Denmark has never been a country of immigrants. The party refused to accept cultural diversity and issued a bill known as the strictest immigration law in Europe. Former party leader Pia Kjaersgaard stated she did "not want Denmark as a multiethnic, multicultural society", and that a multiethnic Denmark would be a "national disaster" [1]. Another example worth mentioning is Viktor Orban of Hungary, who has served as the Prime Minister of this country for more than ten years and has a self-evident impact on the political environment of Hungary. In 2015, during his tenure, Orban adopted a response plan that was close to blocking the border in response to the European refugee crisis, and resolutely refused all illegal immigrants and refugees to enter the country [13]. He and his party attached more importance to Hungary's border security than

a coordinated immigration policy, and Hungary became one of the opponents of the admission of refugees within the European Union at that time. A similar example is the Populist Party Five Star Movement in Italy. Beppe Grillo, the leader of the party and former Prime Minister of Italy, also holds a resistant attitude on the issue of immigration. [12]

On the issue of protectionism, populists also regard it as one of their most important propositions. For example, Marie Le Pen of France and her party National Rally, the Austrian populist party Freedom Party of Austria, Viktor Orban of Hungary, etc. The common feature of these populist roles in economic issues is that they agree that the integration of economy and finance brings short-term prosperity and buries potential adverse effects on the national economy [14]. This negative impact is particularly prominent in the period of economic depression, such as the euro crisis in 2014 and the economic recession caused by the epidemic in 2020. In the economic depression, the open trade policy and the national economy that highly depends on foreign trade to maintain will become unprecedentedly fragile, so it is difficult to survive the economic depression period of declining trade circulation. In addition to trade protectionism, populists also pay attention to protective monetary policy. This policy is closely related to the 2014-euro crisis and the sharp depreciation of the euro due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Since the euro's value fluctuates due to the institutional defects of European banks and external factors, recycling and considering using traditional currencies to stabilize the financial market has become a solution proposed by populists [14].

The negative impact of anti-immigrant sentiment and protectionist economic policies on European integration is more intuitive than the political impact. Anti-immigrant solid sentiment and the inclusive immigration policy that the EU has tried to implement since 2015 are mutually exclusive, which makes it difficult for the inclusive approach to be executed relatively among the EU Member States. For example, in countries that welcome immigrants, such as Germany, and countries that resist immigrants, such as Hungary, the implementation of EU-level policies has received entirely different responses. The EU's different reactions to this topic have exposed the shortcomings of its difficulty in implementing procedures independently without relying on governments. The failure to fully enforce a more inclusive immigration policy is a loss for European integration because some governments also hold the same opinion regarding the exclusion of immigrants within Europe. Protectionist economic policies have rebuilt the financial barriers between the EU Member States, abandoned more active market interaction and trade cooperation, and sought to strengthen internal economic capabilities. This hurts one of the critical economic footholds of the EU: a unified, healthy, and actively liquid European market [15].

4.3 Cultural Aspect

The final perspective is considering about cultural influence. This contains consideration relating to emphasizing national identities and cultural exclusiveness. in local communities. In this field, the most prominent case is the attention to border security shown by Italian populist politicians Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, and the Spanish Populist Party Vox in their policies [16]. The final result of this emphasis may be social, such as anti-immigration policies or tight border blockades, but cultural factors account for a large proportion of its origin. Border security has been recognized as a symbol of national sovereignty since the Westphalia conference, and this concept has been fully consolidated in the following centuries. Traditionally, threats to border security can almost be equated with a war: we only need to look at how many military conflicts have been triggered by border conflicts in history. In constructing the concept of border security, the importance of this concept itself has been constantly raised so that today, immigrants or refugees have also become a potential threat to border security. This threat is sometimes based on social and economic factors, as mentioned above, but sometimes it is based on identity cognition and conceptual factors. For example, the vast majority of the millions of immigrants and refugees that Italy faces yearly are Muslim refugees from North Africa and the Middle East coastline. These people are incompatible with Italy's traditional social structure regarding religious beliefs, culture, traditions, customs, and lifestyles; Therefore, the local people

naturally have hostility and unwelcome feelings toward them. This sentiment is particularly noticeable in an exclusive populist environment [16].

At the same time, the distinction of identity cognition also creates a kind of de facto discrimination. This is fully reflected in Vox's immigration policy. Immigrants are divided into two types. One is Latin American immigrants who have traditional historical ties with Spain. They have the same religious belief, similar language, and similar culture as the Spanish, so they can easily integrate into Spanish Society and resume everyday life. In contrast, the local community did not accept Muslim immigrants from the coast of North Africa because of traditional historical hostility and cultural exclusivity [16]. They became a problem immigrant in the eyes of the Spanish government over time. In the populist environment, people are used to showing different attitudes towards different cultural groups. When we focus on immigrants within Europe, this problem still exists. The rapid expansion of the European Union has covered up the fact that there are significant differences in culture and customs among its Member States, which makes it difficult for the people of one country to build identity cognition with the people of another entirely different country. However, they are all "Europeans" in theory.

From this perspective, the emphasis on the concept of national sovereignty means weakening the idea of supranational entities, which is an essential characteristic of the EU [17]. From the recognition of a series of official documents established in the Lisbon treaty, the power of the EU to transcend national sovereignty in the legal sense was generally recognized at the beginning. This is also one of the sources of EU legitimacy [10]. In this context, populists emphasize that the narrative of national sovereignty hurts the EU's supranational sovereignty status and makes the EU need to give more consideration to the sovereignty of Member States when implementing policies. In this way, the EU will encounter obstacles in promoting deeper sovereignty sharing [16]. Under the increasingly active Populist Movement, these obstacles will likely be challenging to overcome. In addition, similar anti-integration logic is hidden under the concept of emphasizing identity distinction described above. Because a unified EU citizenship identity is challenging to establish, and the deep-rooted identity of each country is difficult to eliminate, it is difficult for European people to understand people from different countries as compatriots [18]. For example, Romanians don't think Belgians are like themselves, nor do Portuguese think Latvians are their compatriots. National solid identity hinders the formation of a European identity, and the role of populists in this cannot be ignored. Therefore, populism is also an obstacle to European integration at the level of cultural affairs.

4.4 Summary

Combined with the above, the negative impact of populism on European integration explored and demonstrated in this paper is generally reflected in three areas. First, in the political field, the rise of populism has intensified public doubts about the emergence of regional cooperation organizations in European integration. Such doubts are manifested in the legitimacy, work efficiency, and hidden dangers of regional organizations. This kind of questioning is expanding under the stimulation of populism and has caused considerable implications in some regions. Secondly, in the economic and social field, the rise of populism has aroused support for exclusive and conservative economic and social policies to a greater extent, including anti-immigration and protective trade policies. These conservative policies hurt European integration deeper because the latter's development requires more inclusive and diversified policies. Finally, in terms of cultural concepts, the rise of populism emphasizes some exclusive concepts in traditional cognition, such as border security, national identity, cultural differences, and so on. Mining these concepts is receiving positive public feedback, such as in Spain, Poland, and Hungary, which is likely to lead Europe to focus on national entities rather than regional organizations or institutions, thereby undermining the achievements of European integration and helping to rebuild the conceptual barrier to a certain extent.

5. Conclusion

In general, by constructing the profound connection between populism and Euroscepticism and the concept of exclusivity, this paper shows how populist ideas or policies hinder the process of European integration. While studying the development of populism in Europe in the past few years, it is noteworthy that this process is still fluctuating for the outcome of the political and economic situation. Just as populism in the 1990s has evolved into a perfect idea today, populism today is also dynamic. It will be affected by the current vital events, such as the economic recession caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war and the epidemic. These new events may provide more motivation and foundation for European cooperation and also let European countries find that their common interests are shrinking. The volatile international situation has provided an excellent development soil for populism. It may also play a role in the visible future, acting as a communicator of public will, urging populist parties and even the incumbent government to implement more conservative and exclusive policies. In an age when public opinion is becoming more and more important, the importance of populism will become more and more noticeable.

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