The Rising Popularity of Populist Radical Right Parties in the EU: Five Case Studies From Southern and Northern Europe

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Populism has been defined as one of the key threats to democracy since the early 2000s making experts increasingly concerned. Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties have been gaining influence in the European Union, even in member states once considered immune to their popularity. By examining the characteristics of these PRR parties in different regions of the EU – North vs South –, it becomes evident how unique historical and societal development has contributed to their rise. What drives their political success and widespread appeal? And what are the broader implications of their rise to power for the EU as a whole?

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Populism is a perspective and communication style in politics that discursively constructs an ongoing struggle between mainstream elites and the people. The former are often described as corrupt and immoral as opposed to the latter who are seen as noble, generous, and good-hearted. Radical Right Populism (RRP) develops populism's broader characteristics of anti-elitism and people-centrism further by promoting racism, and rejecting diversity of culture and religion. This generates a specific sense of vulnerability and wounded dignity due to a perceived lack of consideration by mainstream elites, and consequently promotes opposition to some immigration flows.

In addition, populism fuels a constant sense of suspicion through which the people develop a skeptical approach not only towards mainstream elites but also towards anyone who does not have the "people's blessing" and is not chosen by the people, such as technocrats and experts (scientists, jurists amongst others). A constant feature of RRP, often present in populist discourses, is the tendency to shift importance and power towards the executive branch of the government, as well as a tendency towards illiberalism.

A Threat to Democracy

Populism has often been linked to a crisis of democracy and a threat to its institutions. Studies have stressed this showing evidence of right-wing populist parties' negative effects on democracy when they get into power. As a result, political and social scientists have increasingly stressed the importance of studying their strategies to gain relevance, visibility and popularity.

Studies of these strategies underline how these political actors have managed to propose alternative ways of doing politics that would deliver, according to them, a more consistent and efficient democratic system, which they deem to be morally superior to the current one. This alternative democratic system was discursively created taking advantage of the public discontent and helplessness brought about by the worsening of the economic situation and job insecurity in many EU member states, especially after the 2008 financial crisis.

In addition, it is important to reflect on the precarity and overall insecurity that the process of globalization brought to societies accelerating the distance amongst social classes and enhancing the suspicion of the public towards change (social, cultural or political).

The Role Played by Emotions, Highly Overlooked by Studies on Populism

I consider emotions, namely how individuals deal with situations/phenomena they find personally meaningful, as pillars based on which Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties build their discursive and political strategies. Emotions are defined in psychology as complex reactions, reporting experiential, behavioral and physiological elements.

Amongst others, emotions such as distrust of the current societal system and nostalgia for the past contribute strongly to the popularity of the PRR parties' discourse. Distrust is the manifestation of a suspicion described above: this can be directed more precisely towards politicians but also more generally towards every part of society, seen as egoistic, self-centered actors that only perform based on their personal agenda and do not care about the community they live in.

Nostalgia on the other hand is an emotion very much connected to the distrust of and discontent about the current society emphasizing the moral superiority of an – imagined and constructed – past. When we feel nostalgic, we miss a past that now only lives in our mind and – as such – might present more or less stark differences with the past's reality. These cited emotions are important drivers in the success of the Populist Radical Right parties, but might not be the only ones playing a role.

More importantly, emotions are complex and develop in different ways in different circumstances: distrust and nostalgia have a political potential which, I argue, has not been investigated enough. The strategic use of powerful emotions by the PRR parties needs to be looked at more precisely. In addition, investigating the emotional pillars of societies, and individuals forming these societies, where PRR parties are rising provides crucial insights into the meaning of their success and the potential solutions politicians could propose once getting to know the causes and the public/voters more thoroughly.

Rising Populist Radical Right: A Series

Having introduced the main characteristics of Radical Right Populism, its discursive strategies and its relevance more broadly, the further aim is to highlight through this series the main characteristics of influential Populist Radical Right parties in different regions of the EU. We will present the case of a PRR party that has become a model to many within Europe and beyond, the case of the Italian *Fratelli D'Italia*. We will then further discuss cases of EU member states that were considered immune to the PRR parties' "epidemic," such as Spain and Portugal. We will continue by analyzing the cases of German and Dutch populism.

While much discussion has been devoted to Populist Radical Right parties in Eastern and Southern European countries, more light should be shed on the neglected RRP perspective in the Central and Northern regions of Europe. Thus, through the series, when describing specific cases at the national level, we will also reflect on their broader implications for the EU. Many are in fact the already tangible consequences of the popularity of such parties and political perspectives at the levels of national and European

governance.

This series aims to bring a certain clarity not only in highlighting these consequences, but also by looking at the potential causes, amongst which are the strategies these parties use to appeal to specific sentiments and emotions in the public/the potential voters. Emotions, both at the individual level and their development at the societal and group level, should be given more space in political science research on populism and its success/downfall or failure.

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Note: This contribution stems from a blog post part of a series on the rising populist radical right. It has been edited by Robin Stähli.

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