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The Populist Politics of Euroscepticism in Times of Crisis: A Framework for Analysis

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Abstract:	<p>The European Union has been recently exposed to the multiple shocks of the Great Recession, the migrant crisis, and Brexit. Populist parties have been, either directly or indirectly, considered the principal beneficiaries of these crises in light of their Eurosceptic profiles. In this introductory article, we lay out the conceptual and analytical tools necessary to identify populist Eurosceptic actors, and systematically tackle the under-explored link between populist Eurosceptic framing and the unfolding of the different European crises. While we provide a framework to assess (alleged) changes in the framing of these parties, we also contend that these parties may have released effects in the political process by conditioning shifts in the positions on Europe of their mainstream competitors. In doing so, we define a set of possible interactive scenarios.</p>

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The European Union (EU) has been exposed to multiple stresses during the past decade. Virtually every EU member state has been affected (albeit to varying degree) by the negative consequences of the economic and financial crisis (the so-called 'Great Recession') that unfolded after 2008. While the actual causes of this crisis are manifold, its occurrence primarily emphasised the structural limits of the Eurozone as a currency union without fiscal coordination. Just as the economies of member states were exiting the most severe phase of the crisis and finally undergoing recovery, a new crisis struck the EU. Amid an increasingly instable international political scenario, migrants from near East and African countries reached EU borders in exceptional numbers. In the summer of 2015, the migrant crisis put under considerable strain the internal decision-making of the EU – not to mention the consensus about any international principles of solidarity. In June 2016, the decision of the UK's referendum to opt for 'Brexit' came across as the end result of a prolonged legitimacy crisis.

Already in the months preceding the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, a number of journalistic accounts anticipated a populist Eurosceptic landslide as one of the likeliest outcomes of the vote. While this alarmist scenario did not materialise in full (e.g. Mudde 2014), the reason for assuming a populist takeover in times of crisis rests both on the ideological persuasion(s) of these actors and the loss of legitimacy that recently seemed to affect the EU. Populist organisations traditionally voiced their opposition to 'Europe' on the basis of a composite series of arguments (Taggart 1998; Hooghe et al. 2002; de Vries and Edwards 2009). Moreover, their ability to profit from moments of (real or perceived) crisis instinctively elevated them to potential beneficiaries of these particular events.

Straying from accounts on the performance of these parties in the electoral market, the Special Issue seeks to shed light on the relation between the populist politics of Euroscepticism and the recent crises that have hit the EU. With this objective in mind, we aim to contribute to the existing literature on populism and Euroscepticism by concentrating on what political parties say and do – in other words, the 'supply side' of populist Eurosceptic politics. We do so in multiple ways: first, by ascertaining if and how the ideological contours of Euroscepticism have changed as a result of these crises (i.e. the 'inward' aspect); second, by reinstating the role of crises in the stances of populist Eurosceptic actors (i.e. the 'functional' aspect); third, by establishing if and how these discourses have reverberated across the party-political arena, releasing effects in the wider political process (i.e. the 'outward' aspect).

The recent economic, financial, migrant, and Brexit crises offer unprecedented opportunities to delve deeper into these aspects. While we are generally agnostic about the

possibility that populist actors may have substantively altered the content of their oppositional discourses as a result of these crises, we nevertheless think that parties expressing Euroscepticism might strategically harden their opposition to the EU, and/or frame the issue differently according to changing circumstances (Pirro and van Kessel 2017). However, the direct blaming of the EU for the unfolding of the crises has never quite been a concern for scholars of Euroscepticism. We are interested then to see how the EU is used in the critical and oppositional discourse of populist actors. For the final aspect of our enquiry, we are partly motivated by a growing body of literature pointing to the growing relevance of populist parties in their respective national arenas (e.g. van Spanje 2010; Minkenberg 2015; Pirro 2015). Assuming that populist (in this case, radical right) actors have effectively managed to exert influence on policy dimensions such as immigration or minority politics, we are interested to address the question of changing/additional dimensions of contestation. In other words, what competition dynamics unfold following the co-optation of populist radical issues by mainstream political parties? Does competition shift towards other (i.e. EU-related) policy dimensions? And what are the effects released by populist Eurosceptic actors in the political process?

This Special Issue subscribes to a pluralist approach and encourages the triangulation of different methods and types of data. At the same time, we believe that agreement on concepts and contents is of the utmost importance for the coherence of a collaborative project; we therefore asked authors to familiarise themselves with the guidelines (laid out below) in the drafting of their contributions. In the next section, we elaborate on our conceptual starting points and lay out a minimal strategy to empirically assess developments within the populist Eurosceptic camp in times of crisis.

Conceptualisation and Operationalisation

This Special Issue outlines four key dimensions for understanding populists' relationship with Europe during the last decade. As we deem populism, Euroscepticism, crisis, and impact interrelated, we propose a four-step model whereby each element follows one another. Our framework distinguishes between three concepts (populism, Euroscepticism, crisis) and a dynamic process (impact) in order to determine: a) how those critical events that punctuated European integration over the last decade affected the Eurosceptic politics of populist parties, and b) how the discourses and agendas propelled by these crises shaped party-political relationships to 'Europe'. In outlining our theoretical framework, we deliberately adopt

concepts that have consolidated in the discipline over the years. While we acknowledge that there is considerable debate on definitions, we are keen to move beyond that to tease out the effects of Euroscepticism and populism on European politics.

Populism

We primarily asked contributors to this Special Issue to operate and substantiate a first distinction between populist and non-populist organisations on the basis of the definition provided by Cas Mudde (on a similarly strategy, see van Kessel 2015). According to Mudde (2004: 543), populism is

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

One of the challenges in using populism in this project is the perennial issue of definition. As we have indicated above, we are keen to move beyond definitional discussions to a project where the utility of the concept can be measured through its application to cases. To this end, we are reflecting what we see as a wider trend within the study of populism to move towards an ideological approach (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017) and, within that category, to adopt Mudde's definition. The virtue of the ideological definition is that it moves towards a more circumspect and circumscribed definition, where the content of the beliefs is given value. This is in contrast to more strategic understandings of populism (Weyland 2017), where the ideas propounded are much more empty signifiers in service of strategic ends.

There are four elements of the Mudde definition that give it its utility and which explain the wide usage of it. Each of the elements also resonates with other definitions of populism. The first is the hostility towards elites and a rejection of the 'establishment' in general. The second is the valorisation of the people that is often associated with the importance of popular sovereignty. The third is the binary/Manichean nature of the opposition between the people and the elites (Hawkins 2010). The fourth element is the more general repudiation of politics (Taggart 2000) that is manifest in the idea that the general will of the people should be represented in politics and, by implication, the charge that it currently is not. Taken together, these are useful guides to the sort of positions that parties take. Contributors were asked to identify these elements in the cases that they have examined.

We note at least two comparative projects that have used this definition to examine a range of cross-national cases in multi-regional contexts and this is, at least to some extent, a test of the breadth of conceptualisation. The first is the comparative study of populism in Europe and the Americas by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012). And the second is the study of the reactions to populism in Europe and Latin America (Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015).

Individual contributions focus on the possible changes occurring in the Eurosceptic discourse of (right-wing, left-wing, and centrist) populist parties in different EU member states. Among the values of this Special Issue we indeed include its focus on different variants of populism; its geographical scope, willing to account for EU member states struck by one or more crises; and the specific European dimension under review.

Euroscepticism

Another challenge to which this Special Issue seeks to respond is integrating populism with Euroscepticism. Despite the unexceptional overlap between populist and Eurosceptic politics, we recognise that not every Eurosceptic party is necessarily populist (e.g. AKEL in Cyprus or the early *Grünen* in Germany), and not every populist party is necessarily Eurosceptic (e.g. NDSV in Bulgaria, *Smer* in Slovakia – at least, until recently). The simple observation is that there is no necessary convergence between populism and Euroscepticism. Non-populist Eurosceptic discourses could be attributed to early Green criticism of the EU, which saw it as an exclusive institutional arrangement that was potentially insufficiently global, too neoliberal, and non-environmental. In practice, however, Green parties have largely come to reconcile their politics with changing nature of the EU and feeling comfortable with its practice of non-nationalist co-operation and its practice of environmental regulation. It is also possible to identify populists who are not Eurosceptic. In practice, this is a very small number of cases, which is often better approached by seeing how different populist parties in Europe ascribe a different salience to European issues. As with non-populist Euroscepticism, the category is essentially a relatively small and diminishing number.

In our understanding, Euroscepticism “expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (Taggart 1998: 366). In line with the dominant scholarship on Euroscepticism, we further differentiate between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of Euroscepticism:

'Hard' Euroscepticism implies outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, and opposition to one's country joining or remaining a member of the EU. ... 'Soft' Euroscepticism, by contrast, involves contingent or qualified opposition to European integration. (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004: 3-4)

This broad distinction, already employed in earlier work (above all, Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008a, 2008b), provides us with ample analytical scope to tackle the question of selective or all-embracing emphasis on social, cultural, and/or economic arguments, and the possible intensification of the oppositional discourse of populist parties. The different framing of 'Europe' has been previously attributed to the interests that parties defend at the national level as well as their belonging to the established political camp (Helbling et al. 2010). The analysis of populist radical right discourses during the Great Recession additionally demonstrated that these parties have included economic arguments in their Euroscepticism (Pirro and van Kessel 2017). In particular, we are interested to find out whether parties have 'pushed towards exit' in times of crisis; what sorts of 'exit' they have advocated (e.g. from the Eurozone, rather than the EU); and on the basis of what arguments (e.g. national sovereignty, fiscal matters, etc.). The geographical scope of the Special Issue ultimately highlights patterns of convergence and/or divergence in the Euroscepticism of populist parties in the current scenario. We would also note that Brexit vote has the potential to transform 'hard' Euroscepticism from a being minority concern to being a viable political project.

In terms of Euroscepticism, we are including parties that are both 'hard' and 'soft'. There have been usually few cases of hard Euroscepticism and therefore the bulk of the cases will likely be soft Euroscepticism. There are, of course, boundary issues about what crosses over the threshold from 'friendly' criticism of the EU into the zone of being soft Euroscepticism (Szczurbiak and Taggart 2008b), but in practice it is easier to identify those parties that attempt to make hay out of an essentially negative attitude towards European integration, albeit short of advocating withdrawal, from those parties essentially supportive of European integration, but who feel the need to express criticism of some aspect of European integration (on similar problems, see Kopecký and Mudde 2002). It is a measure of the unusual way that the European issue is framed in politics that we would ever expect a substantial section of support to be unequivocal. It reflects the way in which the framing of 'Europe' is very often in terms of a 'common good' whereas, in practice, it is essentially a (very) complex bundle of (often very) selective goods.

For all these reasons, we need to consider the salience of European integration as a key aspect of our understanding of the degree of Euroscepticism. We need to be sensitive as to whether Euroscepticism integration plays any sort of significant role for the cases under review.

Crisis

Another crucial question relates to the role of the crises. The above qualifications, in addition to the wavering party-based stances on 'Europe' in times of crisis, suggest that the coupling of populism and Euroscepticism may be partly *situational*. One of our initial assumptions indeed interprets possible changes in the Eurosceptic discourse of populist parties as a reaction to triggering factors such as the Great Recession or the humanitarian crisis. Correctly or not, this assumption is based on the (often under-specified) notion that populist parties thrive "in times of accelerated social and cultural change" (e.g. Minkenberg 2002: 339; also, Taggart 2000; on a critique, see Mudde 2007). Whereas much of this relationship appears under-theorised (cf. Moffitt 2015), we seek to pinpoint the actual role of these critical events, ascertain to what extent they effectively played a role in defining the ideological course of these organisations and, in that case, how they fit into the Eurosceptic discourse of populist parties.

The concept of crisis etymologically subsumes a choice between stark alternatives and, thus, demands action. The concept has over time come to denote a transition towards something better, worse, or altogether different, and essentially acquired an aura of ambiguity proper to the emotions attached to it (Koselleck 2006: 358). Yet, it is essentially on the diagnoses prospected by populist Eurosceptics that we wish to concentrate. Different streams of literature enhance our understanding of 'crisis'. Historical institutionalism has referred to 'critical junctures' to identify periods of dramatic flux amid path-dependent stability. A critical juncture is appraised as "a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies" (Collier and Collier 1991: 29). While departing from different epistemological starting points, we believe that interpreting the recent economic, financial, humanitarian, and Brexit crises in terms of "relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantial heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007: 348) helps us clarify some of the relational and dynamic elements of our analysis.

We therefore argue that the recent European crises may have brought about differential changes in institutional settings that could be difficult to alter or revert. These changes would reveal at different levels. On the one hand, crises could modify institutional trajectories, such as economic/financial and humanitarian response mechanisms, or – as the case of Brexit seems to suggest – entirely reconfigure standing terms of international cooperation. On the other, crises could manifest themselves *within* single organisations like populist parties, by affecting their discourses, or *as part of* structured interactions, shaking party systems as a whole. Within the context of structural fluidity brought about by the crises, it would be then easier for populist Eurosceptic parties to challenge the dominant status quo (i.e. the pro-European consensus); at the same time, these challenges are likely to be momentous, with a concrete potential to reverberate across party systems. As some of these crises would qualify as ‘critical junctures in-the-making’ – following recognisable exogenous shocks and endogenous strains, but still without new equilibriums to speak of (Roberts 2017) –, we would argue for a laxer reading of these events.

Somewhat similar implications would pertain to crises as ‘transformative events’. Building on historical sociology, events are regarded as “occurrences that have momentous consequences” (Sewell 1996: 842). Crises, just like transformative events, occur in relatively intense bursts, emphasising their lumpy, rather than smooth, character. Their disruptiveness would lead to changes in cultural schemas, shifts in the allocation of resources, and the emergence of new power configurations. Events such as the Great Recession, the migrant crisis, or Brexit clearly satisfy the condition of being recognised as such by contemporary actors. The question of ‘durable transformation’ remains however open to debate, given the recent occurrence of the critical events discussed.

Crises can be otherwise interpreted in terms of ‘focusing events’, for they can contribute to change the dominant issues on the agenda or in given policy domains. In other words, focusing events would lead to the identification of new problems or force attention onto issues usually downplayed or rejected by the political mainstream. Precisely for this reason, the European debt crisis, or the following migrant crisis, ostensibly offered opportunities for the mobilisation of political challengers such as populist Eurosceptic parties, in that they could tip the balance of contention in their favour (e.g. Birkland 1998). For some, the role of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the Brexit decision has been seen as a model for other populist actors in other EU member states to re-energise their Euroscepticism and to even shift towards a more overtly hard Eurosceptic position.

Whether full-fledged crises have actually taken place remains an empirical question. Despite the salience of the economic, financial, migrant, and Brexit crises across Europe, we acknowledge that these events have affected European countries in different ways, albeit only indirectly in some cases. Moreover, some countries may have dealt with them more successfully than others. We also realise that the downward economic trajectories of individual countries may be endogenous in character, thus preceding grand-scale phenomena like the Global Financial Crisis (Pirro 2017). This is an important caveat that helped decipher the varying fortunes of populist parties through the (separate or concomitant) unfolding of *economic* and/or *political* crises *in the shadow of* the Great Recession (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). With this Special Issue, we move beyond understandings of crises as mere opportunities or background conditions. Contributors were therefore asked to identify the case-specific nature, relevance, and timing of the crises, elaborating on how these occurrences related to, and reflected in, shifts (or lack thereof) in the discourses of populist Eurosceptic parties.

Impact

Finally, and in line with the aspect of change running through our understanding of crisis, we move our focus to the broader 'supply side' of Eurosceptic politics and expand our enquiry to party competition at large. In doing so, we intend to single out and clarify whether populist parties have been able to exert any sort of impact in the political process. Populist parties certainly do not operate in a vacuum and their (often unparalleled) role of Eurosceptic torchbearers may have affected (read, conditioned) the (discursive or policy) trajectory of other parties. Having come under the multiple pressures of political competitors and far-reaching crises, mainstream parties may have adapted to the Eurosceptic standards set by populist actors.

With an ever-growing set of contributions claiming that populist (radical right) parties have been able to remould the dynamics of European party competition (e.g. Bale 2003), it seems opportune to extend the area of enquiry beyond the more predictable areas of immigration and ethnic minorities (e.g. Harmel and Svåsand 1997; Pirro 2015). By impact, we refer to populist parties' *ability to wield direct or indirect influence on respective political systems in general, and policy dimensions in particular*. The stimulus introduced by populist parties would then consist of the capacity to change course of events, which might develop differently otherwise (Williams 2006: 42).

Party impact has been variously interpreted and tackled. In this project, we narrow down the analysis to the supply side of Eurosceptic politics and draw on contributions that have previously looked at the interaction between (populist) radical parties and their mainstream competitors (e.g. Minkenberg 2001; Meguid 2005). We focus both on the *type* of responses stimulated and the *level* at which these unfold. As for the type of responses (Downs 2001), mainstream parties can either opt to 1) engage or 2) disengage from competition with their populist competitors on the European dimension, hence moving towards a deeper understanding of party interactions over this specific issue dimension. These strategies will alternatively result in:

- 1a) collaboration with the populists on European issues;
- 1b) co-optation of their Eurosceptic agenda;
- 2a) attempts to isolate populists in their Eurosceptic trajectory;
- 2b) attempts to ignore the Eurosceptic appeals of the populists.

Given the relevance acquired by populist actors in their respective political arenas, very few mainstream parties will be able to ignore the Eurosceptic pleas of their competitors (2b); we then assume that most of these interactions will cluster around co-optation (1b) or isolation (2a) strategies.

When the supply side of Eurosceptic politics is taken into account, we also consider the level at which these strategies materialise. Simply put, the Special Issue examines interactions between populist and mainstream parties taking place at the 'institution-shaping' and 'policy-making' levels (Williams 2006). With the first, we indicate interactions affecting the structure of party competition, admittedly often bound to discursive territories, and which can be operationalised for instance through the analysis of political spaces (e.g. Benoit and Laver 2006). With the second, we refer to influence exerted at the legislative level, which can be operationalised by systematically reconstructing the decision-making process – thus, ascertaining whether any Eurosceptic legislation implemented, or policy trajectory undertaken, can be directly attributed to populist Eurosceptic parties. This should practically clarify whether the influence of populist Eurosceptic actors remains a strategic-discursive affair, or whether their influence extends to more consequential legislative spheres.

This Special Issue

The framework presented here and the set of contributions included in this Special Issue collectively offer an initial attempt to tackle the populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis. The goal is therefore not only unravelling the substantive contents of populists' Euroscepticism and monitoring its evolution over time, but also deciphering where and how the EU fit into the three crises identified. By delving deeper into the linkage between populist Euroscepticism and crises, we no longer treat crises as background conditions (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas 2015), but take them frontstage as integral part of populist oppositional discourses. Finally, where the populist politics of Euroscepticism had gained sufficient traction, we sought to ascertain whether populist actors managed to tip the balance of contention towards Euroscepticism.

Moving from this, we asked contributors to the Special Issue to proceed in a step-like manner and: a) identify populist parties; b) elaborate on the nature and possible evolution of their Eurosceptic agenda (e.g. from soft to hard Euroscepticism, and vice versa), as well as the themes (i.e. cultural, economic, etc.) deployed across relevant periods; c) identify relevant crises and qualify their role in terms of the Eurosceptic trajectory of populist parties (i.e. positioning, salience, and contents); d) ascertain whether populist Eurosceptic parties were able to trigger competition on 'Europe' with their mainstream rivals, and examine the responses elaborated by the latter.

The Special Issue includes single case as well as comparative studies. Tim Bale's article looks at UKIP's transformation into a populist Eurosceptic force and its symbiotic relationship with the Conservative Party, prior to and amid Brexit. Gilles Ivaldi's contribution examines the French *Front National's* incorporation of Euroscepticism within its ideological framework across the recent European crises. Charles Lees' piece discusses the emergence of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) – Germany's own populist Eurosceptic response to the crises weathered by the EU. Sofia Vasilopoulou's contribution analyses the evolution of Eurosceptic stances in the Greek political context – indeed a case where populism had been a dominant paradigm. Andrea Pirro and Stijn van Kessel's article looks at the changing populist Eurosceptic frames in the face of the multiple crises in Italy and the Netherlands. In their piece, Margarita Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Carolina Plaza-Colodro tackle the changing interaction between populist and Eurosceptic politics in Portugal and Spain. Finally, Nicolò Conti examines the attitudes of national political elites towards the EU. In the concluding article, Andrea Pirro, Paul Taggart, and Stijn van Kessel bring together the material from the individual contributions to offer a comparative overview of the findings and to reflect on the

implications of these findings for the study of populism, Euroscepticism, and the European crises.

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¹ Referring here both to the EU and the broader process of European integration.

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