

Varieties of Populism in Europe: Is the Rule of Law in Danger?

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Abstract What the current surge of populism shows is that the rule of law and liberal democracy find themselves in great danger when the breadth of democratic support for their core principles begins to decrease. Both in Hungary and Poland, the populist forces relatively easily undermined the rule of law and democracy, and steered politics in a dangerous authoritarian direction. Ultimately, democratic political parties with credible political ideas and platforms offer the best hope for protection of liberal democracy. As the Western European examples show, as long as there exist credible liberal political platforms, the threat to the rule of law and democracy is not existential. While populists in Western Europe challenge certain liberal values and policies, they lack the capacity to threaten the essence of liberal democracy.

Keywords Populism · Rule of law · Democracy · Authoritarian populism · Varieties of populism · Central and Eastern Europe · Western Europe · Constitutionalism

1 Introduction: Varieties of Populism in Europe

The populist surge is global. Political parties, movements or leaders such as Trump, Kaczynski, Orban, Erdogan, Putin, Morales, Maduro, Marine Le Pen, Strache, Wilders, to name just a few, claim to be the sole “true” representatives of their

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peoples against the corrupt elites.¹ Populism is an ideology or political movement 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 *volonte generale* of the people.”² Populism seeks to speak in the name of the common people. Its distinctive features are the prioritization of popular sovereignty, direct democracy and a strong emphasis on anti-elitism.

Beyond these shared common features, populism emerges in a variety of forms. While populism is hostile to elites, it is also vague and moralistic and as such quite easily instrumentalized by almost any type of ideology, both left and right. Following Paul Taggart’s definition of populism,³ we argue that populism is chameleon-like, ever adapting to the colors of its environment. It has no core values and a very thin ideology. Hence, there exist several rather different varieties of populism: agrarian, socio-economic, xenophobic, reactionary, authoritarian and progressive populism.⁴ In order to fully understand the logic of the different populisms, we have to approach them as socially and historically contingent categories. Besides the global factors, we also have to study local conditions and factors, which help explain a variety of forms that populist movements assume. As Anna Grzymala Busse argues, rather than analyzing populism *per se*, we should recognize that it takes a variety of guises.⁵

This article argues that in East Central Europe (ECE), most notably in Hungary and Poland, a particular type of populism has emerged. The authoritarian populism in ECE differs from other populisms because it combines the elements of populism, ethno-nationalism⁶ and authoritarianism. While ethno-nationalism is present in most of Western European cases, it is the third element, authoritarianism, which sets the ECE type of populism apart from other European cases.⁷ Authoritarianism in the ECE context does not mean only the adoption of certain authoritarian values,⁸ such as stringent security, intolerance of multiculturalism and pluralism, but also a “style of governance that attempts to circumvent the rule of law and democratic norms in favor of centralized authority and limited political freedom”.⁹ Authoritarian populists in Hungary and Poland are explicitly anti-liberal but not necessarily anti-

¹ Judis (2016), Muller (2016a), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017).

² Mudde (2004), p. 534.

³ Taggart (2000), p. 4.

⁴ Canovan (1981), Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), pp. 495–498.

⁵ Grzymala Busse (2017), p.3.

⁶ Ethnic-driven nationalism or ethno-nationalism is often about a shared ancestry, religion, and language and a common dissent. It has to be differentiated from civic nationalism, which is often based on political principles and respect for institutions that rest on subjective identification with a nation. See Bonikowski (2017), pp. 189–190.

⁷ The left-wing populism of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain does not fall into this category. On this point, see Judis (2016), Rodrik (2018).

⁸ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart adopt such approach in defining authoritarian populism, see Norris and Inglehart (2018).

⁹ Bonikowski (2017), pp. 189–190.

democratic.¹⁰ They embrace the “form” of democracy and claim to speak for the people themselves, but, at the same time—by undermining its liberal constitutional foundations—they erode the substance of democracy and gradually transform it into various forms of illiberal and authoritarian regimes.¹¹

In Western Europe, populist parties are “less prominent, less numerous, and less powerful than in the continent’s east.”¹² As of the time of writing, they are part of the ruling coalition in Austria (as a junior coalition partner) and in Switzerland, where they have membership on the Swiss Federal Council. In Italy, the Five Star Movement won the largest percentage of votes in the most recent (March 2018) elections, but the coalition talks with the second largest populist party, the League, are still underway. In other parts of Western Europe, populist parties still remain in the opposition. As we argue in this article, their form of populism is different from the authoritarian populism that we see in ECE. Most notably, ethno-nationalism in Northern and Western Europe has shifted from nationalism to “civilizationism.”¹³ This shift is driven by the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam and has given rise to identitarian “Christianism,” which internalizes liberalism, secularism, philosemitism, gender equality, gay rights, and free speech.¹⁴ At least in this respect, Western European populists do not oppose liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law.

These two different types of populism present different challenges for the rule of law in Europe. While authoritarian populism in ECE has already undermined the rule of law and democracy and transformed Hungary and Poland into semi-authoritarian and illiberal regimes, the populists in Western Europe at the moment pose a lesser threat to the rule of law.

2 Authoritarian Populism in East-Central Europe¹⁵

In Europe, the main populist threat comes principally from the East. Less than 15 years after accession to the European Union, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria have witnessed populists come to power. As a recent empirical study shows, the appeal of these populist parties has increased quite rapidly in the last two decades.¹⁶ Since 2000, when populist parties took an average of 9.2% of the national vote, their vote share has tripled, reaching 31.6% in 2017.¹⁷ An alarming finding of the Freedom House Study *Nations in Transit*¹⁸ report shows that for the first time since 1995, there are now more consolidated authoritarian

¹⁰ Grzymala Busse (2017), p. 8.

¹¹ Muller (2016a), pp. 60–64.

¹² European Populism: Trends, Threats, and Future Prospects (2017).

¹³ Brubaker (2017), p.1191.

¹⁴ Brubaker (2017), p.1208.

¹⁵ This section is drawn from Bugarcic (2018).

¹⁶ European Populism: Trends, Threats, and Future Prospects (2017).

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit* (2017).

regimes than consolidated democracies in the region. Hungary now has the lowest ranking in the Central European region. Poland's score reached its lowest point in the survey.

Shortly after the global financial crisis in 2008, which served as a catalyst for change, alternative economic and political ideas emerged and spread through the region.¹⁹ Neoliberal economic policies were gradually replaced with various statist models of development, combining economic protectionism with elements of leftist social welfare policies.²⁰ At the same time, political liberalism has been challenged by open flirtation with illiberal²¹ and authoritarian forms of government.²²

Despite sharing many of the core elements of populism, not all populists in ECE are the same.²³ Authoritarian populism has so far emerged only in Hungary and Poland, the two front-runners of democratic transition. In Slovakia, on the other hand, the left wing populist Robert Fico lost his absolute majority in 2016 elections and quickly toned down his populist rhetoric. The winner of the October 2017 elections in the Czech Republic is Andrej Babis, a billionaire populist impatient with the give-and-take of democratic politics, although not yet someone with a clear illiberal nationalist programme. His populism rhetoric is closer to the plutocratic version of populism espoused by figures like Donald Trump and the former Italian Prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who promised to rid the country of corruption and run it like a business.²⁴

Roughly a decade after Vladimir Putin steered his country toward “Putinism”,²⁵ a new ideology aspiring to represent a Russian alternative to Western liberal order, Hungary followed in these footsteps. Spearheading this trend is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whom EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker half-jokingly called a “dictator.” Orbán has denounced the West as decadent and obsessed with money, and outlined a future Hungarian state—a “work based society”. Orbán called his approach, adopted after his 2010 election victory, the ‘Eastern winds’ approach to economic policy, to distinguish it from Western liberalism.²⁶ The key pillars of Orbán's new economic policy were re-nationalisation of certain private companies, mostly in what he considered to be strategic sectors like oil (MOL), gas, utilities and banks, punitive taxation of foreign banks and insurance companies, and economic protectionism. The Orbán government's

¹⁹ Barber (2015).

²⁰ Applebaum (2016), Orenstein (2013), pp. 374–402.

²¹ Illiberal democracies are understood here, following Fareed Zakaria definition, as: “democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.” See Zakaria (1997), p. 22.

²² Müller (2014), pp. 14–19.

²³ Stanley (2017), pp. 140–160, Grzymala Busse (2017).

²⁴ Erlanger (2017).

²⁵ Putinism represents a mixture of economic statism, political authoritarianism and Russian Orthodox fundamentalism. Putin's economic nationalism is strongly embedded in his “conservative revolution”, emphasizing the importance of Russian national “character” being at odds with traditional liberal values and principles. See Applebaum (2013).

²⁶ The Economist, Orban and the Wind from the East (2011).

Eastern Opening, while officially an economic policy, has from the beginning been heavily imbued with the implication of political and social transformation away from Western liberalism and individualism toward Eastern authoritarianism and collectivism. After Viktor Orbán's speech in Tusnádfürdő, it became more than clear that he wants to create an illiberal state, a different kind of constitutional order from liberal democracy.²⁷ The Orbán government has transformed Hungary into a semi-authoritarian regime that limits freedom of speech and assembly, curtails media pluralism, and undermines protection of minorities. Orbán has also curbed the independence of the courts, the civil service, and of other institutions essential to the rule of law.²⁸

At the moment, the Hungarian version of authoritarian populism represents the most problematic example of this trend in the region. The Fidesz government achieved a fundamental revision of the rules of the constitutional and political order in Hungary. In a scant 8 years, it managed to transform Hungary from one of the success stories of the transition from socialism to democracy into a semi-authoritarian regime, where the new constitutional structure vests so much power in the centralized executive that no real checks and balances exist to restrain this power.

In Poland, the new right-wing and populist Law and Justice (PiS) government has also set out to exploit a mix of ethnic nationalism and anti-capitalism reminiscent of that present in the interwar period, when authoritarianism—masquerading as democracy—prevailed in Admiral Miklós Horthy's Hungary and Marshal Józef Piłsudski's Poland. After winning the majority of votes in 2015 elections, Poland joined Hungary on its path to authoritarian populism.²⁹

Like in Hungary, the first target of the new Polish government was the Constitutional Tribunal. Nevertheless, in March 2016, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal unexpectedly struck back, declaring many of the new provisions to be in violation of the constitution. In a decision that deepened Poland's constitutional crisis, the tribunal ruled that the reorganization called for by the new legislation prevented the Tribunal from working "reliably and efficiently." Shortly afterward, Poland's Supreme Court (the country's highest appellate court) passed a resolution stating that the rulings of the Constitutional Tribunal should be respected, despite its stalemate with the government. The government, however, announced that it would ignore the Tribunal's ruling and refused to publish it in the official Gazette, as required by the constitution. An enraged Kaczyński addressed the Sejm, condemning both high courts for opposing reforms passed by parliament. "[We] will not permit anarchy in Poland," Kaczyński declared, "even if it is promoted by the courts."³⁰ A year later, Poland's parliament approved the new Supreme Court legislation aimed at curtailing the judiciary, the country's last bastion of independence.³¹ After adopting six new statutes on the Constitutional Tribunal,

²⁷ Edy (2014).

²⁸ Bánkuti et al. (2012a), p. 268, Bánkuti et al. (2012b), pp.138–141.

²⁹ Kelemen (2016).

³⁰ Kaczyński Announces Aim to Change Polish Constitution, Radio Poland (2016).

³¹ Sadurski (2018), pp. 35–44.

the populists transformed it into “a positive aide” to the government.³² The new Law and Justice government also undermined Poland’s independent civil service and adopted a new legislation seeking to bring the media under direct government control.³³

At the same time PiS economic policy focused on making life and work more secure—on supporting workers and unions. Its two main policy proposals were monthly payments of 500 zloty to parents with two or more children under 18, and rolling back the retirement age from 67 to 60.³⁴ These legal and economic changes are part of a broader conservative political program founded upon a set of moral values that purportedly serve the protection of the Polish nation. As Leszek Koczanowicz argues, PiS “aims not only to transform certain external conditions, but also to accomplish a comprehensive re-invention of mentality and radically re-direct the trajectory of social thinking”.³⁵

The authoritarian populism in Hungary and Poland consists of certain core elements. The first element of this version of populism is what Jan Werner Muller calls moralized anti-pluralism. Leaders like Orban and Kaczynski claim that “they, and they alone, represent the people.”³⁶ In their worldview, there are no opponents, only traitors. The opposition leaders are delegitimized through being cast as not caring about ordinary Polish and Hungarian citizens, but only about the interests of various “liberal” elites. While moralized anti-pluralism is a relatively standard populist trope, in the ECE context it gets profoundly illiberal connotations. As Rogers Brubakers shows, ethno-nationalism in Northern and Western Europe has shifted from nationalism to “civilizationism”.³⁷ This shift has been driven by the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam and has given rise to identitarian “Christianism”, which internalizes liberalism, secularism, philosemitism, gender equality, gay rights, and free speech as “an identity marker of the Christian West vis-a-vis a putatively intrinsically illiberal Islam”.³⁸ In ECE, on the other hand, ethno-nationalism remains fundamentally nationalist and deeply illiberal. As a result, the ECE version of nationalism externalizes liberalism, “construing it as a non-national and even anti-national project that subordinates the interests of the nation to foreign capital, on the one hand, and to foreign models of multiculturalism, Roma rights, LGBT rights, and refugee protection, on the other hand.”³⁹

The second element, the noninstitutionalized notion of the people, means “that the populist asserts or assumes that there is a singular and morally privileged

³² Sadurski (2018), *ibidem*.

³³ Müller (2016b).

³⁴ Fomina and Kucharczyk (2016), p. 61.

³⁵ Koczanowicz (2016), p. 94.

³⁶ Muller (2016a), p. 20.

³⁷ Brubaker (2017), p.1191.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 1208.

understanding or will that has not been manifest through the formal structures of democratic choice.”⁴⁰ The role of the populist leader is to do what the people want. The formal structures of liberal democracy have to be put aside if they are preventing the populist leader to fulfill his role. Populist leaders distrust all the traditional institutions of liberal democracy that stand between them and the wishes of the people. As a result, many of the ECE nationalist populist parties openly flout the rule of law and explicitly reject the values of liberal democracy. A corollary of this view is the strong personalization of power, reflected in the fact that strong leaders like Orbán and Kaczyński have managed to concentrate almost unlimited political power in their hands. Again, such an anti-liberal understanding of democracy is not something peculiar to populists in Poland and Hungary. What differentiates Orbán and Kaczyński from other populists in Europe is the extent to which they oppose liberal democracy. They have gone much further in subverting liberal democracy than most of the other populists in East-Central Europe. It is the third element, a conservative and authoritarian ideology, combined with the absence of a strong opposition, that led them to this crusade against liberalism. Irena Grudzinska-Gross writes about “the revival in Poland, Hungary and ... some other countries of the region, of the very old conservative style of government, including the resurrection of the extreme right wing movements and, in Poland, of religious fundamentalism.”⁴¹ Iván Széleányi and Tamás Csillag argue that this drift to illiberalism and authoritarianism has also a legitimating ideology, a traditionalist/neoconservative ideology, which emphasizes the value of patriotism, religion, and traditional family values. They maintain that a combination of political illiberalism, economic statism and conservative ideology represents the building blocks of a new type of order in post-communist world: A managed illiberal capitalism.⁴² Because of these additional features, this form of populism has strong authoritarian inclinations.

3 Western European Populism: A Threat to Liberal Democracy?

After Brexit and Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections, the March of populists seemed almost unstoppable. No longer limited only to a distant periphery of the European Union, it has also spread to many Western European democracies.⁴³ On average, around 13 percent of the vote in Western Europe goes to populist parties. This represents a 4 per cent increase compared to 2000.⁴⁴

But, unlike in ECE, where populism is very strong, the populists have so far failed to win national elections in any of the Western European countries. In Italy, the populist parties together won almost 60 percent of the vote, but it remains to be seen if they will be able to form a ruling coalition. While the Five Star Movement

⁴⁰ Huq (2018), p. 12.

⁴¹ Grudzinska-Gross (2014), p. 664.

⁴² Csillag and Széleányi (2015), pp. 1–27.

⁴³ Taggart (2017), pp. 248–263.

⁴⁴ European Populism: Trends, Threats, and Future Prospects (2017).

took 32 percent, becoming the largest party in parliament, the League emerged as the leading conservative force, with 18 percent of the vote.⁴⁵ Key for explaining why Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria, Geert Wilders in Netherlands, and Marine Le Pen in France failed to persuade the majority of voters is the reinvigorated political response from the new defenders of liberal political values like Van der Bellen (Austria) and Emmanuel Macron (France), or repositioning of the ruling mainstream parties (Mark Rutte, Sebastian Kurz), who persuaded the Dutch and Austrian voters that they (still) represent a credible alternative to the populist right.⁴⁶ As a result, in most of the Western European cases, we can only examine the characteristics of populism as oppositional political force, its electoral promises and ideological narratives. Because they are not in power, Western European populists can only indirectly challenge the rule of law institutions of their respective countries. As they bring more competition on the far-right end of the political spectrum, they have push many center-right parties “to adopt more extreme positions on issues including migration.”⁴⁷

Recent developments in Austria reveal an interesting trend, potentially relevant for other European developed democracies as well.⁴⁸ The Austrian contest was the first in a series of elections to shed light on whether Trump’s victory in the US and the triumph of Euroskeptics in Britain were adding momentum to the populist surge in the West. The candidate of the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ), Norbert Hofer, swept the initial round of the small country’s presidential elections last April with a comfortable 35 percent of the vote. After a humiliating defeat of the candidates put forth by the current government’s two leading coalition members—the centrist Social Democrats and the People’s Party—the Social Democrat Chancellor Werner Faymann resigned. In the December 2016 runoff contest between the Green Party candidate Alexander van der Bellen and Hofer, van der Bellen won.

As in the United States, there was a sharp divide between urban and rural regions in the Austrian elections. Van der Bellen’s strongest backing appears to have come from the socially liberal, well-educated voters in Vienna and Austria’s eight other cities, particularly from women and young voters. Hofer, by contrast, has won over the vast majority of the nation’s blue-collar workers (90 percent) small-town voters.

One puzzle is how Hofer and his Freedom Party’s nationalistic and openly xenophobic rhetoric have achieved such popularity in Austria, which is the 12th richest country in the world, has one of the highest per capita income levels in the EU, and boasts a more-than-generous welfare system. As John B. Judis explains in his short book, *The Populist Explosion*, such “populism amid prosperity”⁴⁹ has surfaced in the even more prosperous Denmark, which has the second-highest per capita income in the EU, and an unemployment rate of only 4.6 percent. How is this possible?

⁴⁵ The Financial Times, Italy’s coalition talks: can two tribes become one (2018).

⁴⁶ The Financial Times, European politics: leaders struggle to contain rising populism (2017).

⁴⁷ European Populism: Trends, Threats, and Future Prospects (2017).

⁴⁸ Heinisch (2017).

⁴⁹ Judis (2016).

One key reason is that both the FPÖ in Austria and the People's Party in Denmark have undergone significant political "reorganizations" that downplay their allegiance to their extremist and xenophobic base, and rebranded themselves as parties of the "ordinary man" left behind by a corrupt system that caters to the elites. Both parties combine anti-immigrant rhetoric with strong support for the welfare state, which explains their increasing popularity among members of the working class.

Last year's national elections marked the first occasion of the FPÖ receiving more working-class votes than the Social Democrats. Freedom Party leaders proudly pronounced themselves a "New Labor" party, signaling a proletarianization of the FPÖ electorate. The party's most effective message to capture voters who were once loyal supporters of the centrist ruling groups has been to warn that an influx of refugees will jeopardize the blessings of the welfare state—universal health care, child support, and free education for all.

Nevertheless, FPÖ's election promises, emblazoned on posters that read "Your Homeland Needs You Now" and "Austria Needs Safety," also demonstrate that what counted at this election was apparently not rational calculation but rather nascent attitudes revolving around the feelings of voters about having been "left out." It's a largely negative appeal to protest votes aimed at the established order and elites. Immigrants are not to blame for poorer economic performance, given that job data show some of the biggest losses in sectors where immigrants are not well represented: the arts, entertainment and recreation, real estate, science and technology, and finance and insurance industries.

FPÖ presents itself as an alternative to the mainstream parties, which it says have failed to offer credible solutions to pressing immigration and economic problems and lost the courage to develop a new and inspirational vision for the country's future. Since the 2008 Great Recession, Austria's economy has underperformed compared with its European rivals, with sluggish growth and a soaring unemployment rate that has reached an unprecedented 10 percent.⁵⁰ A series of corruption scandals have also stoked political disaffection.

Furthermore, FPÖ favors gun rights, stricter border control, and preventing gay couples from marrying or adopting children, and opposes immigrants, particularly Muslims, globalization, the EU, and the euro. FPÖ also claims to stand for protecting the welfare state for Austrian citizens, enabling the party to tap a broad variety of different political constituencies and cultural values. Not unlike Trump, FPO operates on a rather malleable platform, shifting easily from one position to another, if that is what it takes to capture more voters. For example, following the Brexit vote in June, FPO presidential candidate Hofer hinted that the Freedom Party might call a referendum on Austrian membership. But after opinion polls showed that his remarks had upset voters, he quickly backtracked, dropping any suggestions his party could take the country out of the EU. This that mobilized pro-EU voters distrustful of Hofer's anti-Europeanism and at the end turned electorate largely negative votes to Van der Bellen, who strongly endorsed the EU, its values and principles.

⁵⁰ Marin (2016).

It is impossible to identify one single factor that would explain FPO popularity. FPO's success is not as much about new ideas or programs as it is about anger, dissatisfaction, and the disappointment of people who feel betrayed by elites. Moreover, Van der Bellen, like Hofer, was something of a protest candidate. He, too, strongly repudiated Austria's centrist ruling parties, which have shared power for six decades, by campaigning against the entrenched system of patronage that he claimed had corrupted Austrian democracy over the years.

Following the collapse of the SPÖ-ÖVP coalition, Austria's main parties agreed to hold early parliamentary elections on October 15, 2017. A reformed People's Party (ÖVP), under the leadership of populist Sebastian Kurz, won the elections. On December 18, 2017, a new Austrian government took office, consisting of a coalition between the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ). In Austria, like in some other Western European democracies, the center-right party (ÖVP) adopted a new strategy in its struggle with the seemingly invincible populist right. It adopted a policy mimicking the agenda of the right wing nationalist parties. A central pillar of these policies is a draconian and punitive approach to refugees from the Middle East. Austria, for example, legally closed the borders for immigrants from Syria and elsewhere. They erected legal walls, which prevents immigrants from applying for asylum in those countries. These measures represent a desperate effort by center-right governments to compete with the right wing nationalist populists to gain more popularity. But the price for this strategy turns out to be very high: By playing this game, the People's Party has moved the political choices further to the right. In other words, even if the right wing populists lose parliamentary election, they essentially win, because their agenda becomes the agenda of their competitors. Geert Wilders, the most popular politician in Netherlands, declared that he has already won the elections, even if he failed to win a majority of votes. He is the one who dictates the electoral agenda to the Dutch voters.

One of the more interesting questions is why populists in ECE have been politically more successful than their Western counterparts, with the exception of Brexit campaigners, the new Austrian government and the winning populist alliance in Italy. We argue that several factors were at play, but that one of the key reasons contributing to an early rise of populism in Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic was the absence of credible liberal politico-economic alternatives, which was crucial in helping the populists fill this "gap" and successfully seize political power in the abovementioned countries. Unlike in ECE, the resilience of liberal parties in Western Europe seems to be much stronger, preventing populists like Hofer, Le Pen and Wilders from win elections in Austria, Netherlands and France.

Nevertheless, we agree with Dani Rodrik who argues that "...despite recent setbacks in the polls in the Netherlands and France, it is doubtful that populism will be going away."⁵¹ Inequality, declining trust in democracy and apparent inability of the mainstream center left and center right liberal elites to properly respond to these problems should continue to be cause for concern. This is what makes the new

⁵¹ Rodrik (2018).

populists so appealing and successful in their political struggle. They claim to fill the void left by other mainstream political parties.

Furthermore, judging by the Macron victory in France, it seems that the populist surge in the West can be reversed—but only if European leaders articulate a coherent alternative to the failed economic policies of the last decade. An economic policy that promotes growth, better jobs and wages, and social inclusion can stem the nationalist tide.

To prevent history from repeating itself, Europe must act now. Since the beginning of the Euro-zone economic crisis in 2009, governments across Europe have single-mindedly embraced fiscal austerity. This has meant double-digit government spending cuts, and the elevation of the austerity paradigm spearheaded by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to an essentially ‘unbreakable law.’ The new Fiscal Compact, a treaty signed by all EU members except the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic, effectively outlaws the counter-cyclical economic policies espoused by Keynesianism, and establishes austerity and balanced budgets as the new fundamental principles of the EU constitutional order.

The problem is that this myopic austerity focus rests on a misdiagnosis of the Euro crisis; has backfired economically, and has triggered grave social and economic repercussions in indebted countries. Nevertheless, austerity remains the virtually unchallenged ‘official’ EU economic doctrine. What Europe needs more than anything is a new anti-austerity coalition. Only a Europe willing to revert back to some basic Keynesian policies of economic stimulus, as the US government did at the outset of Barack Obama’s presidency, combined with economic innovations that include much-needed investments in infrastructure, education, and social programs, can restore Europe to stability, and reverse its dangerous nationalist surge.

Unfortunately, the politically weakened European mainstream center-left and center right are now on the defensive. But instead of surrendering to the populist agenda, European liberal democrats must respond to the social anxieties that are helping fuel nationalist populism. Populist leaders are promising better pensions, health care and more jobs, an agenda that is winning over the abandoned working class communities that were once a stronghold of European social democratic and other progressive parties. Leaders of both social democratic and centrist parties can reverse the nationalist trend by returning the EU to its initial role as the promoter of European solidarity and equality, specifically through job training, “green” growth and other public investments. As the humiliating defeat of Greece’s Leftist government by the German-led austerity coalition illustrates, this will take a concerted, Europe-wide initiative. If European social democrats and liberals perpetuate their failure to offer a more compelling agenda, Europe is on a dangerous political path.

4 Conclusion

Liberalism and democracy coexist in contemporary liberal democracies. That there is a tension some would call it contradictions between the two has always been a matter of debate among modern political thinkers. Carl Schmitt, a leading German

legal thinker of his time, argued that their incompatibility leads to the inescapable contradiction between liberal individualism and democratic homogeneity resulting in the crisis of parliamentary democracy. The only true democracy for Schmitt was direct, plebiscitary democracy based on the homogeneity of the nation.⁵²

What the current surge of populism shows is that the rule of law and liberal democracy are in great danger when their core principles no longer enjoy wide democratic support. Both in Hungary and Poland, the populist forces relatively easily undermined the rule of law and democracy and steered the political course into a dangerous authoritarian direction. Unlike Schmitt, we argue that the contradiction between the rule of law and democracy is not “inescapable” but contingent on several different factors causing current drift from liberal democracy to authoritarian populism. Ultimately, democratic political parties, with credible political ideas and programmes, offer the best hope for protection of liberal democracy. As Western European examples show, as long as there are credible liberal political platforms, the rule of law and democracy are not exposed to an existential threat. While populists in Western Europe challenge certain liberal values and policies, they do not threaten to undermine the essence of the liberal democracy, i.e. the rule of law.

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