

# Populism

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### Foreword

This paper is a contribution from the General Secretariat of the Council (Analysis and Research team) to the ESPAS work programme. The aim of the paper is not to present an academic analysis of populism, but rather to offer a political assessment, and to look at the potential implications of the trend of populism for the European institutions.

### Introduction

Through its growing influence in Western democracies, populism has become a significant political phenomenon that seeks to gain influence and ultimately assume political leadership. It is important to understand the mechanisms and dynamics that are contributing to populism, particularly given that a more authoritarian strain of populism is gaining ground.

The Cambridge Dictionary named 'Populism' its 2017 word of the year. It succeeded 'paranoid' and was followed by 'nomophobia' (phobia related to the excessive fear of being separated from one's cell phone), unintentionally making the link between individual anxiety, the fear of new technology and political action which plays on these fears, amongst others.

Populism is of course more than the summation of these different dimensions. Because it is a function of history and culture, it combines many different aspects and is constantly evolving. Defining it is therefore a challenge. Whilst it is possible to identify a number of characteristics shared by most populist movements: an emphasis on popular sovereignty and direct democracy, anti-elitism, anti-pluralism<sup>1</sup>, an exploitation of social divisions and conflicting visions of the world, of inequality, and of an uncertain future, there are also differences. In short, populists come in many shapes and sizes<sup>2</sup>.

For example, although traditionally associated with the political right, populism is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Left wing populism has proved to be resilient, and should not be ignored. In recent decades, populism in varying forms has become more prevalent, and is increasingly determining electoral success across the world.

A clearly shared characteristic of all populist leaders is their avoidance of anything that resembles a comprehensive political programme. Instead they promise simplistic political solutions to specific issues. These solutions then become a trademark of the individual leader<sup>3</sup>. This approach puts the 'people' at the heart of a rhetoric that conflates identity with the polarisation of ideas, cultures and political leanings. As the word 'Populist' suggests, the overriding theme is the representation of the true will of the 'people' against the 'elites'<sup>4</sup>.

Populism can be seen as a symptom of democracy in retreat, but also as an instrument driving that retreat. It taps into fears of new economic, sociological, demographic and technological

developments that together can resonate powerfully with the electorate, as happened in the referendum leading to the departure of the UK from the EU.

An added difficulty of defining populism is that populist methods and narratives are becoming increasingly mainstream. Traditional politicians can easily be tempted by the allure of populist methods if they think they will bring them electoral advantage.

In addition to looking at key trends, this paper analyses four possible futures for populist movements and their impact on the European Union.

**Trends that challenge democracies and contribute to the rise of populism:**

From...	To...
Democratic expansion	Democratic backsliding
Promotion of democracy worldwide	Protecting democracy at home against alternative models
Rules-based multilateral order	Rise of border sovereignty
Primacy of the liberal democratic model	Global competition of systems
Checks and balances	'Populocracy' gaining ground
Experienced elected leader	Inexperienced elected newcomers
'Catch-all' parties cutting across cleavages	Complex power-sharing amid rise of polarising challenger parties
Strong affiliation and party loyalty	Voter volatility
Voter apathy	Citizen engagement and democratic innovations
9 o'clock new narrative in newspaper, radio and TV	24/7 news streaming
Media-validated information	Platforms/social media without filter
Propaganda	Weaponisation of disinformation
Evidence-based policymaking and governance	Data abuse, truth decay
Progress in gender equality and diversity	Cultural backlash through policies which reject diversity

Source: GSC-ART, based on European Political Strategy Centre<sup>5</sup>

## Global trends: what is driving populism?

The recent growth in populist parties and their influence in public debates is often seen as a consequence of democracy fatigue, the economic crisis of the 2000s or the uncontrolled migratory flows coinciding with terrorist attacks in several Member States. Some argue that it is driven by a wider range of structural trends, from the effects of globalisation and world trade on income distribution<sup>6</sup> to a perceived decline in social status<sup>7</sup>. Populist leaders can use open liberal societies as a scapegoat by portraying them as the villains in a nostalgic narrative of an idealised past<sup>8</sup>.

### **A: Global democratic backsliding accelerated in COVID time**

Worldwide, 2020 was the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom<sup>9</sup>. The gap between setbacks and gains widened, as individuals in 64 countries, including many Europeans, experienced a deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, while those in just 37 experienced improvements between 2018 and 2019<sup>10</sup>. Nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced democratic deterioration in 2020. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) reports that in 2020, for the fifth consecutive year, more regimes moved towards authoritarianism than towards greater democracy, the longest period of democratic decline since 1975, when the first study was conducted<sup>11</sup>. According to IDEA, non-democratic countries now constitute 45% of the world's states, a tripling in 30 years.

Overall, democracy was dealt a major blow in 2020. Almost 70% of countries covered by The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index<sup>12</sup> recorded a decline in their overall score, as country after country locked down to protect lives from the pandemic. The global average fell to its lowest level since the index began in 2006. While many of the measures were key in helping tackle the pandemic, some see the restrictions which were placed on civil and democratic rights, as well as the increased use of surveillance technology, as undermining democracy. The pandemic is estimated to have weakened democracy in 80 countries, meaning that 34% of the world's population live in democratically declining states.

Graph 1: Democracy Index, Global average of 167 countries, 10 = most democratic



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit<sup>13</sup>

















































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narratives: 'Continued Growth', 'Collapse', 'Discipline' and 'Transformation'. The Manoa School method to explore the future of a particular issue or phenomenon consists in building comprehensive (and often global) societal scenarios for each of the four archetypal narratives, and then to describe the characteristics that the issue or phenomenon under consideration would assume in each scenario. For example, the Manoa School might ask 'what would populism look like in a context of continued global socio-economic growth? And what would it look like in case of a future global societal collapse?' The approach followed in this paper differs from the Manoa School method insofar as the four archetypal narratives have not been applied to generic global societal futures, but rather to the future of populism itself. The four archetypes have thus been used as brainstorming prompts to imagine the four scenarios described in this paper. For further description of the Manoa School method, see Sohail Inayatullah, 'Six pillars: futures thinking for transforming', *Foresight*, 2008, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 16-17. For a practical example of the application of the Manoa School approach, see David N. Bengston, Jim Dator, Michael J. Dockry and Aubrey Yee, 'Alternative futures for forest-based nanomaterials: an application of the Manoa School's alternative futures method', *World Futures Review*, 2016, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 197-221.

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