Populism: concepts and conditions for its rise in Europe

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At a time when leading European politicians warn against ‘populist excesses’ (the French President François Hollande), against the ‘winds of populism’ currently threatening Europe (EU-President Herman van Rompuy) or appeal to the electorates to avoid ‘a return to populism’ (the technocratic Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti), the discussion of populism has become a hot topic in social sciences. In the present paper I would like to discuss the concept of populism, and some of the possible conditions for its recent rise in Europe. I introduce two versions of the concept, which are, as I see it, related to each other, but which are not necessarily shared by different authors and which belong to different traditions in the literature. My discussion of the conditions for the rise of populism distinguishes between its immediate causes and two sets of facilitating conditions – each of them closely related to one of the two version of the concept. My argument builds on and refines some of my recent contributions to the same topic (see Kriesi and Pappas 2015a, and Kriesi 2014).

Two versions of the concept of populism

Populism is a notoriously slippery and contested concept that needs clear defining. My reading of the literature leads me to distinguish between two distinct, but complementary concepts – populism as an ideology and populism as a political strategy.

Populism as an ideology

Populism can be defined as an ideology that splits society into two antagonistic camps, the virtuous people and some corrupt establishment, effectively pitting one against the other (Canovan 1999: 3; Laclau 1977: 172-3; Mudde 2004: 543; Urbinati 2014: 131, 151). More
specifically, following Mudde (2004: 543), we can conceive of populism as an ideology which ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous 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’. This definition includes

- the existence of two homogenous groups – ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’,
- the antagonistic relationship between the two,
- the affirmation of the right of the majority against any minority, political or otherwise
- a ‘Manichean outlook’ (the construction of a ‘we’ against a ‘them’) that combines the positive valorisation of ‘the people’ (the exaltation of the purity of the people) with the denigration of ‘the elite’.

As has been pointed out by Stanley (2008) and Stanley and Ucen (2008), this conceptual core is distinct, but ‘thin’, in the sense established by Freeden (1998: 750) of an ideology unable ‘to provide a reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate’. Populism’s ‘thinness’ is a product of the vagueness and plasticity of its core concepts, which allows it to be combined with a variety of ‘thick’ ideologies, such as nationalism or socialism, that add more specific content to it. ‘Conceiving of populism as a thin ideology’, as Stanley and Ucen (2008: 8) observe, ‘resolves the persistent problem of how to account for the variety of political content associated with manifestations of populism whilst simultaneously positing a set of common elements, but it also illustrates the dependent relationship of populism on ‘fuller’ ideologies that project a more detailed set of answers to key political questions’.

For all kinds of populists, ‘the people’ is paramount and whatever their specific view of the people, they share a monolithic conception of the people. The polarization between people and elite ‘unifies the people and simplifies pluralism so as to give it a clear antagonistic structure that
is consistent with the electoral structure of modern democracy’ (Urbinati 2014: 160). As Canovan (2002: 34) points out, the people is always conceived as a homogenous category, a unity, a corporate body capable of having common interests and a common will – a ‘volonté générale’.

All populists also share the notion of a people as sovereign, and all of them deplore that democracy is not working because the sovereignty of the people has been eroded and is threatened with being ever-further eroded. In addition to this conceptual core notion and depending on the ‘thick’ ideology with which the ‘thin’ ideology of populism is combined, ‘the people’ may also be conceived as ‘nation’ (right-wing populism) or as the ‘common men’, the ‘little guys’, the ‘poor’, the ’99 percent’ or the ‘exploited’ (left-wing populism).

The monolithic conception of the people as a homogenous unity not only implies the antagonism between the people and the elites, but also opens the possibility of the exclusion of ‘others’ – non-elite groups who do not belong to ‘the people’. Depending on the ‘thick’ ideology that is complementing the thin populist core, specific groups of ‘others’ may be singled out as scapegoats who, in addition to or in combination with the elites, are to be blamed for the predicament of ‘the people’. As Urbinati (2014: 147) points out, populism ‘is a politics not of inclusion but primarily of exclusion: this is what polarization is for’. She adds that ‘it is not by chance that ‘the people’ is its sovereign core, not ‘the citizen’ as in democracy’. Examples of groups excluded by right-wing populists comprise all kinds of ethnic minorities (e.g. Roma or Jews), immigrants, and the undeserving beneficiaries of the welfare state (those who benefit from social security without having contributed to it).

Populism develops within existing democracies, it is ‘a shadow cast by democracy’ (Canovan 1999: 3) and populists see themselves as true democrats, ‘their professed aim is to cash in democracy’s promise of power to the people’ (Canovan 1999: 2). But it is important to keep in
mind that the populists’ ‘thin’ ideology implies quite a specific, *illiberal vision of democracy* (Pappas 2013, 2014). We can identify three illiberal components of the populist vision of democracy: it takes ‘government by the people’ literally and rejects liberal checks and balances (the ‘constitutionalist dimension of democracy’ in the terms used by Mény and Surel 2002); it is hostile to intermediaries between the people and the decision-makers, especially to political parties (Pasquino 2008: 21), and pleads for a more direct linkage of masses to elites (Taggart 2002: 67); and it is also illiberal because of its monolithic (or unanimous), and, we should add, predetermined conception of the will of the people which leaves no room for pluralism or deliberation) (Mastropaolo 2008: 34f.; Urbinati 2014: 132ff.). Urbinati (2014: 150) maintains that ‘[p]opulism may actually be described as a recurrent attempt within democratic societies to disassociate democracy from liberalism’.

Populism as an ideology manifests itself in specific *discursive patterns* for identifying foes and solidifying the community of friends. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and Hawkins (2009) among others have introduced the conception of populism as a *discursive pattern or political communication style*. This notion of populism is even ‘thinner’ than populism defined as a ‘thin’ ideology. As a matter of fact, I consider this notion to be too thin to be of much analytical value. Any political actor may from time to time use populist figures of speech without being necessarily subscribing to the populist ideology. However, populism as discourse is very helpful for attempts to operationalize populist ideology. Populist ideology becomes visible in the political communication strategies or discursive patterns of the populist actors. The populist communication style puts an emphasis on the fundamental role of the people, claims that the people have been betrayed by those in charge, i.e. the elites are accused of abusing their position of power, and that the primacy of the people has to be restored (Mény and Surel 2002: 11f.). Several authors have usefully proposed indices to operationalize the populist ideology based on an analysis of the
discursive pattern of political texts (such as party manifestos, speeches or press releases) (see Aslanidis 2014, Bruhn 2012, March 2012, Rooduijn et al. 2014, Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011, Pauwels 2011).

**Populism as a political strategy**

From populism as an ideology or a political program, we should distinguish populism as a political strategy. Some authors, most notably authors writing about Latin America conceptualize populism as a specific way of competing for and exercising political power. Thus, Weyland (2001: 14) argues that populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader (my emphasis) seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers‘. According to this definition, the connection between the people and the leader is mostly based on direct quasi-personal contact, not on organized intermediation. This kind of personalistic leadership should be distinguished from the general personalization of politics, which is an omnipresent phenomenon nowadays (see below) that, in turn, serves to fuel populist strategies (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Personalistic leadership means that, as Eatwell (2006: 153) has pointed out, ‘some leaders become the personification of a party or regime’.

The connection of the personalistic leader to his/her followers corresponds to the ‘charismatic linkage’ in Kitschelt’s (2000) typology of democratic linkages. Contrary to programmatic and clientelistic linkages, the allegiance to the leader in the charismatic type is rooted in personal qualities. It involves asymmetry between leaders and followers, but also directness and great passion. This kind of linkage corresponds to the ‘thin’ ideology of populism, which gives short shrift to programmatic elements. Populist leaders may promise anything in substantive terms
precisely because their ideology is a ‘thin’ one that may be combined with very different substantive demands. Kitschelt is mainly interested in the contrast between programmatic and clientelistic linkages and mentions the charismatic type only in passing. He considers it as a ‘most likely transitory linkage mechanism’ because charisma is difficult to sustain. He suggests that, sooner or later, ‘charismatic leaders or their successors will be forced to routinize authority relations and put them on a different grounding’ (p. 855).

In spite of their critique of intermediary organizations and in spite of their reliance on charismatic linkages, populist leaders need political parties as organizational vehicles to mobilize in the name of ‘the people’. However, in line with the overall characteristics of the charismatic linkage mechanism, these parties tend to be ‘personal parties’, i.e. parties which are the product of the leader rather than the leader the product of the party (McDonnell 2013: 5f.). As McDonnell (2013) suggests, in such parties, party communications are focused on the leader and the leader dominates the party, the party’s expected lifespan is seen as dependent on the political lifespan of its founder-leader and organization at the local level is neither constantly manifest nor permanent. Berlusconi’s Forza Italia is a case in point, as are the parties led by Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand. However, not all populist leaders have created their own personal parties. In the European context, some of these populist parties (e.g. the Lega or the SVP) are not personal, but rather ‘personalized’ parties – parties, where the leader plays an important role, but which are also highly organized at the grassroots level.

The personalistic leader does not belong to the established political elites, but is an outsider (a new challenger), who incarnates the demands of ‘the people’. He (it’s most often, although not always (see Marine LePen, Pia Kjaersgaard or Siv Jensen) a man) has direct, unmediated access
to the people’s grievances, and acts as the spokesperson of the vox populi (Abts 2011: 930). The leader as the spokesperson of the vox populi is, in fact, one with the people whose deepest feelings he (or she) articulates. The monolithic conception of the leader (there is only one) and of the leader’s (hierarchically structured and centralized) political organization (if there is one) corresponds to the monolithic conception of ‘the people’ of the populist ideology. In this very specific sense, populism as an ideology and as a political strategy are complementary, and tend to, although they do not need to, go together. The direct, populist form of representation by a personalistic leader promises to make politics transparent by offering ‘a short-cut that bypasses philosophical disputes and institutional niceties’ (Canovan 2002: 34).

**The relationship between the two conceptualizations of populism**

The two concepts of populism may be used independently of each other, but they may also be combined as Urbinati (2014) has done in her discussion of populism, which probably constitutes the most ambitious recent attempt of getting to terms with this concept. As conceptualized by Urbinati (2014), populism needs both, an ‘organic polarizing ideology’ and a leader who mobilizes the masses in order to govern in the name of ‘the people’. Combined, the two elements amount to a *project of political renewal* that ‘wants to redress democracy by taking it back to its ‘natural’ roots’ (p. 151). Urbinati sees in the search for a leader one of populism’s most specific characteristics (p. 153) and suggests that populism leads to a ‘mono-archic emendation of democracy’, or, in other words, to Caesarism (or Bonapartism) – the direct and personal rule by a charismatic strongman that is based on a cult of personality.

We can also gain some analytical traction by keeping the two conceptions separate from each other and study their relationship in different forms of political mobilization. Even if in the
political reality, the two tend to go together, they do not need to do so. The characterization of populism in terms of ideology refers to the substance of political mobilization, the one in terms of political strategy refers to its form. To put the phenomenon of populism into a broader perspective, let me introduce an admittedly crude classification of different forms of political mobilization. Based on the channel of mobilization (on-electoral vs electoral) and the degree of integration into the polity (challenger vs mainstream) of the mobilizing group, we can broadly distinguish between four forms of mobilization:

Table 1: classification of different forms of political mobilization

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<tr>
<th>Challenger/mainstream</th>
<th>channel of mobilization</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-electoral</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenger mainstream</td>
<td>social movement</td>
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<td>mainstream</td>
<td>movement party</td>
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<td>political party</td>
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Three of the four forms are familiar to the reader – social movements (challengers mobilizing in non-electoral channels), interest groups (mainstream actors mobilizing in non-electoral channels), and political parties (mainstream actors mobilizing in electoral channels). The fourth form of mobilization – ‘movement parties’ – I take from Kitschelt (2006), who defines such parties as ‘coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition’ (p. 280). Kitschelt has in mind political parties that emerge from social movements, such as the ecologists, but he also discusses parties of the populist radical right that have not grown out of movements. While movements from the left may institutionalize in the form of parties (e.g. socialist, communist and ecologist parties) and interest groups (e.g. labor unions or environmental associations), movements from the right tend to take the form of parties from the very
outset: by choosing the conventional electoral channel for articulating their challenge, political activists on the right seek to differentiate themselves from the social movement activists whom they associate with the left and from their strategies which they consider as incompatible with their traditional value-orientations (Hutter and Kriesi 2013).

Movement parties from the left still tend to be characterized by the organizational characteristics of the movements they emerge from – decentralized grassroots network structures without a clear leadership. By contrast, populism as a political strategy is typical of movement parties from the right. As we have seen, the personalistic leader of the right typically mobilizes in the electoral channel, based on direct, charismatic links with ‘the people’, without the support of an elaborate party organization. However, the element of the personalistic leadership is not incompatible with the existence of grassroots organization. In some cases, the personalistic mobilization strategy may be the only one available for a political leader from the right, while in other cases (such as the Lega Nord or the SVP) it may coexist with more organized forms of mobilization. Even allowing for less than pure cases of a populist strategy – cases, where the charisma of the leader has already been partly routinized (Lega Nord), or where the charismatic leader took over an already routinized party organization (SVP) –, personalistic leadership is typical of movement parties from the right. The Italian ‘Movimento 5 Stelle’ is a strange hybrid of a movement party to the extent that it mixes the populist strategy of parties from the right, with the grassroots’ network structures of social movements from the left.

Contrary to populism as political strategy, populism as ideology is not clearly associated with a particular form of mobilization. While the personalistic leaders of the populist right also tend to adopt populism as an ideology, the ideological version of populism is not restricted to this type of political mobilization. A wide range of social movements may subscribe to populism as ideology
(Roberts 2015). The broader the scope of a social movement’s constituency or appeal, the more likely it is to subscribe to the populist ideology. Encompassing popular movements that attempt to mobilize the entire population (‘we are the people’, ‘we are the 99 percent’) against the elites (‘the Communists’ in the case of the Monday evening demonstrations in Leipzig in 1989, or ‘Wall Street’ in the case of Occupy) are particularly likely to adopt the populist ideology. Aslanidis (2014) has documented the discursive populist elements of the Occupy, Indignados, and Aganaktismenoi movements.

For the subsequent discussion of the conditions for the rise of populism, I focus on the conditions for the rise of movement parties from the populist right and the left, which combine elements of the populist strategy with populism as ideology.

**Conditions for the rise of populism**

Following Canovan (1999), populism thrives on the tension between the redemptive face of democracy and its pragmatic face. Canovan is careful to point out that this tension is not the same as the tension between liberalism and democracy, nor is it equivalent to the tension between democratic ideals and realities. Crucially, both liberalism and the pragmatic face of democracy embody political ideals, too, but ideals that collide with the redemptive face of democracy. Her point is that democracy as a secular redemptive vision promises a better world through the action by the sovereign people – ‘salvation through politics’ – and that it is this promise which creates the tension with liberalism and with the pragmatic face of democracy. At the same time this promise crucially provides legitimacy to the democratic regime. Where the citizens believe in the redemptive character of democracy, the acts of the government are seen by the citizens as the expression of their will. The belief in the redemptive capacity of democracy serves to empower
the government and contributes to its legitimacy. By contrast, where the citizens have doubts about whether the acts of the government express their will, where they perceive the government as lacking the power or the willingness to act in the name of their collective interest, the government will lose democratic legitimacy. If the belief in the redemptive capacity of democracy is undermined, populists get their chance.

**The basic condition: a crisis of representation**

Populism is intrinsically linked to crisis. For Laclau (1977, 2005a, 2005b), populism simply cannot emerge without crisis. In line with Canovan’s argument, it is a *political* crisis – a crisis of representation, which is at the root of any populist mobilization. Similarly, Roberts (1995: 113) maintains that populism ‘is a perpetual tendency where political institutions are weak. However, it surges most strongly in contexts of crisis or profound social transformation’. Other scholars focusing on Latin America argue in a similar way. Given its essentially anti-elitist orientation, populism can be expected to thrive on popular dissatisfaction with the elites. Such dissatisfaction can have different origins, depending on the national context, but it is certainly expected to increase in crisis situations. Let me hasten to add that a crisis is not necessarily exogenous to the development of populism. If crises provide an opportunity for populist mobilizations, they are in turn aggravated and brought to a climax by the populists’ mobilization themselves. This has been argued most forcefully by Moffitt (2014: 2), who suggests that ‘rather than just thinking about crisis as a trigger of populism, we should also think about how populism attempts to act as a trigger for crisis.’

The current rise of populists in Europe can be linked to long-term trends in political representation. As suggested by Laclau, this rise has arguably been driven by a *crisis of representation,*
especially by the deficiencies of party government as we knew it (see Mair 2013). This crisis of representation has taken different forms in Western and Central- and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, mainstream political parties have become less and less able to mobilize the voters: indicators are declining party membership and party identification, declining voter turnout, increasing volatility of the vote and declining shares of voters who choose the mainstream parties. Mainstream parties have become less able to structure political conflict as a result of a process of increasing dealignment between parties and voters. We witness the transformation of parties into catch-all parties which recruit their voters from all walks of life, the withdrawal of the leadership of the mainstream (cartel-) parties into the government institutions, and the depoliticization and convergence of mainstream parties on the major policy issues. Mair (2009) attributed this erosion of the mainstream parties’ representation function to the increasing tension between ‘responsibility’ and ‘responsiveness’, i.e. the tension between the parties’ role as representatives of the national citizen publics, and their role as governments being responsible to a wide range of domestic, inter- and supranational stakeholders. The mainstream parties’ lack of responsiveness can be interpreted as the immediate source of some West European citizens’ loss of faith in the ‘redemptive capacities’ of democratic government and their receptivity to the sirens of populism.

The tension between ‘responsibility’ and ‘responsiveness’ is rooted in even deeper changes in West European societies and in West European politics (Kriesi 2014: 364f.). On the one hand, long-term trends of secularization, tertiarization, rising welfare and rising female participation in the labour force have attenuated the classic conflicts of religion and class. This undermined the traditional social bases of the major political parties in Western Europe. On the other hand, the embedding of national political systems into supra- and international governance structures, i.e. the increasing denationalization of politics and policy-making, and the related empowerment of
the executive branch at the detriment of parliament, and the equally related rise of so called ‘non-
majoritarian’ forms of representation, i.e. of poorly visible, electorally unaccountable,
technocratic forms of governance, have been increasingly undermining the linkage between
parties and their voters.

Mair (2002: 88) has laid a direct link between these developments and the rise of populism:

‘As party leaderships become increasingly remote from the wider society, and as they also
appear increasingly similar to one another in ideological or policy terms, it simply becomes
that much easier for populist protestors to rally against the supposed privileges of an
undifferentiated political class. As party democracy weakens, therefore, the opportunities for
populist protest clearly increases’.

In other words, the lack of responsiveness of the mainstream parties to specific new demands
from society provided new challengers who appeal to the unrepresented demands arising from
socio-economic change with the opportunity to mobilize successfully. In particular, the lack of
responsiveness of established parties to the plight of the ‘globalization losers’ provided a chance
for their mobilization by the new populist right parties. As we have argued (Kriesi et al. 2006,
2008, 2012), globalization has transformed the basis of politics in Western Europe by giving rise
to what we have called a new ‘integration-demarcation’ cleavage. Processes of increasing
economic, cultural and political competition linked to globalization created latent structural
potentials of globalization ‘losers’, which were successfully mobilized by parties of the radical
populist right.

For different reasons, Central and East European party systems have also been characterized by
a considerable estrangement between the citizens and the established political elites after their
transition to democracy. In Central and Eastern Europe, party systems have not yet produced
stable mainstream parties that reliably represent their constituencies: in contrast to the party systems of Western Europe, the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe have never been institutionalized to the same extent. In Central and Eastern Europe, the low level of institutionalization of the party systems has provided a general opportunity for the rise of new populist challengers. This opportunity became all the more important, given the widespread dissatisfaction of the Central and Eastern European publics with their political elites. The high costs of economic transition and the low level of political and administrative performance have contributed to the constitution of anti-elitist sentiments which provide a general breeding ground for populist challengers. Populism thrives on corruption and partiality, lack of rule of law, and general ineffectiveness of government. It also thrives on large-scale political scandals. The emphasis here is on ‘large-scale’: although national elections (not only in Central- and Eastern Europe) are increasingly held in the shadow of political scandals, these events have typically been incon-sequential for voter satisfaction. Only major scandals, involving more than one party tend to have an impact on the voters (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2011).

As a result of the particular combination of party systems lacking institutionalization with generally poor political performance, ‘centrist’ populist mobilization, i.e. a ‘pure’ version of populism that is reduced to anti-establishment posture without any other ideological element (Ucen 2007: 54), has characterized Central and Eastern Europe already before the recent economic crisis. These ‘centrist-populist’ parties have ‘largely arisen as a reaction to the general disappointment of East European electorates with mainstream parties and the high cost of economic reforms’ (Pop-Eleches 2010: 232).
Facilitating condition I: the role of the media

Against this general background of a ‘crisis of representation’, there are two sets of facilitating conditions which are likely to contribute to the opportunity for contemporary populist mobilization. The first of these facilitating conditions concerns the role of the media. Contemporary media generally contribute to the crisis of representation and to populism in terms of political strategy. They do so by reducing the role of the party apparatus, by linking the party leaders more directly to the voters, by enhancing the personalization of political leadership, and by fostering the ‘depoliticization’ of the party base. As a result of their professionalization, commercialization and technological change, the news media increasingly operate according to their own ‘media logic’ in selecting, presenting, and interpreting the political news, a logic to which political actors are obliged to adapt (Esser 2013: 166-174; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Mazzoleni 2008). Parties and politicians devote more attention to what Esser (2013) calls the ‘self-mediatization of politics’, i.e. the self-initiated stage-management of politics by means of strategic communication in an effort to master the new rules that govern access to the public sphere. Politicians, parties and governments professionalize their internal and external communication and devote more of their resources to communication (Esser and Matthes 2013). Professional communication specialists at the service of party leaders and governments are replacing party militants. The party leaders communicate directly with the public audience via the media and they no longer need the party apparatus to get their message to their constituency.

More specifically, the ‘media logic’ plays into the hands of populist challengers. Mazzoleni (2008a) writes of an unintended complicity between populist actors who seek media attention and tabloid media which give short shrift to programmatic debates and privilege elements of politics that are part of the populist discourse (the focus on conflict and scandal, the dramatization,
emotionalization, polarization, and stereotyping of the presentation, as well as the emphasis on the ‘common sense’ of ordinary citizens over elite discourse and party representatives). Moreover, by its tendency to personalize politics (attributing political activity to individuals as opposed to parties and institutions and constructing political news around persons and their characteristics), the ‘media logic’ favors charismatic linkages between the political leader and his/her constituency which correspond to the populist strategy. Most importantly, the fact that the omnipresence of the contemporary media allows the political leaders to reach out directly to the people facilitates the populist strategy, which relies on the direct link between the leader and his or her voters. This first set of conditions should facilitate the rise of populism similarly across European countries.

Given the importance of these theoretical expectations, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence for them. On the one hand, there is little evidence for a systematic trend towards personalization of politics (Adam and Maier 2010, Karvonen 2010, Kriesi 2011). The findings on media coverage are most supportive of this trend, but evidence for other aspects, such as the effect of personalization on voters’ behavior, is less conclusive and varies from one country to the other. More recently, Garzia (2013) could show, based on British and German data, that voters’ evaluation of leaders has gained prominence for their partisanship at the expense of both traditional socio-demographic characteristics and classic party features such as issues and ideology. Moreover, for the three Italian elections from 2001, 2006 and 2008, Garzia (2013a) was able to show that the leader’s personality does matter for the outcome of the election. Apart from an increasing number of studies on personalization more generally, there is, however, hardly any study on the specific impact of media on populism. To the extent that they exist, such studies only test whether tabloids are more amenable to populists than quality news. Unexpectedly, they fail to confirm this hypothesis (Schulz et al. 2014).
**Facilitating condition II: economic crises**

The second set of facilitating conditions concerns the current *economic crisis* in Europe. A deep *economic crisis* is expected to enhance the antagonism between ‘the people’ and some political or economic elites, which serves to intensify populism-*qua*-discourse and promotes its electoral success. Where the economic crisis creates socio-economic misery and deepens economic inequality, populist discourse falls on fertile ground. In addition to enhancing right-wing populists, the Great Recession also provides an opportunity for left-wing populism, which has always been framing its anti-elitism in economic (class) terms. The fact that the Great Recession in Europe manifested itself mainly as a sovereign debt crisis actually provides both left-wing and right-wing populists with a golden (discursive) opportunity to reframe economic conflicts in nationalistic terms. Typically, the elites attacked by populists have been domestic elites, but given that the sovereign debt crisis has led to a conflict between ‘debtor’ and ‘creditor’ countries in the Eurozone, the elites that come to be the object of populist attacks may also be supranational ones (e.g. the ‘Troika’) and/or elites from other nation-states (e.g. the German Chancellor Angela Merkel for the Greeks).

The contributions to the volume edited by Kriesi and Pappas (2015) find confirmation for the effect of the economic crisis given the rise of left-wing populist challengers in *Southern Europe*. The two Southern European countries covered by this volume, Italy and Greece, provide ample evidence for the close relationship between the economic crisis and the rise in populism. This evidence also points to the significance of outside enforcers (i.e. the Troika, European public opinion) as objects of populist wrath. More specifically, in both countries the economic crisis amplified the antagonism between ‘the people’ and the elites, whether domestic or foreign, even allowing for the fact that populism in these two countries had preceded the Great Recession and
had already scored great political successes before the crisis, including long bouts of populism in power – FI/PdL in coalition with LN in Italy, and PASOK as well as ND in Greece.

The economic crisis may be linked to the political crisis, as the Latin American experience reminds us. When in government in the 1980s and 90s, some Latin American mainstream parties from the left had to implement austerity programs imposed by the Washington consensus. The adoption of these policy measures, which were deeply inconsistent with their own programmatic stance, led to a ‘dilution of the party brand’ of these parties, which weakened their partisans’ attachments giving rise to dealignment and, eventually, to a breakdown of some of these parties (Lupu 2012, Roberts 2013). Party breakdown was particularly likely to occur, when the harsh policy measures adopted to combat the economic crisis did not have the expected economic success. In a situation where the economic crisis deepens the political crisis, the combined effect of the two crises is expected to be particularly conducive to populism.

This is again confirmed by the Greek and the Italian cases. In addition to the economic crisis, both countries experienced deep political crises and saw the levels of public trust in political institutions nosedive during the Great Recession. Electoral volatility was phenomenal and Greece in particular saw its party system transform fundamentally from a two-party system into a polarized multiparty one. The Greek socialists of PASOK, who, when in government, were forced to implement an austerity program that was entirely incompatible with their programmatic commitments and electoral promises that they had made only a few months before, were essentially destructed by the combined impact of the economic and political crises, following the example of the Latin American experience of left-wing incumbents mentioned above.

Also in line with the economic crisis thesis, the North-West European countries least hit by the Great Recession provide a contrast with the Greek and Italian experience. In the Nordic countries
(Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden), the economic crisis was less pronounced, its impact on populism was rather limited and populism remained rather moderate. The most recent rise of the Swedish Democrats (2014) and of the True Finns (2011) do not directly result from the economic crisis, but can be interpreted in terms of the long-term tendencies undermining the mainstream parties, which is to suggest that, belatedly, the impact of the general demarcation-integration conflict on the respective party systems has been making itself felt even in these countries.

Except for France, the effects of the economic crisis have also been rather modest in the Western European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland). All five countries feature solid and durable populist parties, which are well entrenched in their respective party systems. During the Great Recession, these parties continued to mobilize mainly on the cultural dimension and, profiting as did the True Finns from the discursive opportunity of the Euro-crisis, they utilized explicitly anti-EU rhetoric, some of them even advocating their countries’ withdrawal from the EU. The major exception to this overall picture is France – the only country in this region where populism displays an impressive surge at both national and European election levels. Thus, according to all evidence, it is a general sense of economic malaise and political malfunctioning that the Great Recession has helped intensify in France and that, to a large extent, explains the growth in support for the FN.

Central and Eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland) are characterized by varying economic crises and disparate populism: Against the general background of widespread dissatisfaction with the political performance of the governments in these countries, country-specific political crises (large-scale scandals) contributed to the populists’ success in the three of the four countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) that were already more or less heavily hit by the economic crisis. In Slovakia, finally, it was the protracted political crisis in the aftermath of the clash within the governing centre-right coalition over
Slovakia’s participation in the EFSF that led SMER-SD to an unprecedented victory in the 2012 elections. In addition, the experience of populism in CEE countries provides maybe the most clear-cut evidence for Moffett’s (2014) thesis that crises are not just triggers of populism, but that populism also ‘attempts to act as a trigger of crisis’.

Finally, the English-speaking countries covered by the volume (Ireland and UK) constitute similar cases, but with contrasting outcomes: the case of UKIP seems, indeed, to confirm the causal relation between economic crisis and the increase in populist discourse and in populist electoral success. Ireland, on the other hand, most firmly refutes it. Here is one of Europe’s most severely hit economies, but with almost no trace of a populist party. As O’Malley and FitzGibbon (2015) point out in their analysis of the Irish case, there are at least three possible explanations for this anomaly: in addition to the high electoral threshold for aspiring new party entrants (especially for securing political funding) and to Ireland’s high rate of success for independent or non-party politicians, it is above all the diffusion of populism across all major parties in Ireland (a situation recalling US party politics, which is also characterized by intense populism in the absence of a purely populist party), which is characteristic of the Irish case.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have distinguished between two conceptions of populism – populism as ideology and populism as a political strategy. These two conceptions, which have their origins in two different strands of the literature, do not necessarily have to be combined but can be used separately to analyze populist phenomena. However, in the form of movement parties, especially populist parties of the radical right, populism as ideology and as political strategy are typically combined. In the second part of the paper, I have discussed the general precondition for the rise
of such parties – a crisis of representation that undermines the citizens’ belief in the redemptive capacity of democracy –, as well as two sets of facilitating conditions – the role of the media and the role of the economic crisis in contemporary Europe. As a result of a crisis of representation, populism has been on the rise across Europe for some time. Although this crisis took different forms in Western and Central-/Eastern Europe, it served to enhance the rise of populism in both parts. The rise of the ‘media logic’ is likely to enhance populism as a political strategy across Europe, but empirical evidence for its impact is rather scarce and, for the time being, mixed. Similarly, the economic crisis is also expected to serve as a catalyst for the rise of populism as an ideology in the form of populist movement parties from both left and right. The empirical evidence in this respect is more abundant, but equally mixed. Except for Southern Europe, where populist movement parties have been making strong advances under the impact of a particularly serious economic crisis, the latter has had a more limited effect on its rise in the other parts of Europe.
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