Identity politics, populism and the far right

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The term ‘populism’ tends to overshadow the debate concerning democracy and the far right. ‘Populism’ sometimes seems to be the escape route to prevent any substantial discourse about contemporary anti-democratic trends. This chapter argues that populism is a phenomenon rooted in the very concept of democracy. If democracy is defined by the competition of two or more parties or candidates for votes (Schumpeter 1950), this leads to a populist policy of appeasing the existing interests of the electorate, or of specific electoral segments. The consequence is a usually polemic language of simplified exclusion and inclusion. The question ‘Who is a populist?’ can only be answered by saying that, in a democracy, every party and every candidate running for election is, in a certain way, a populist. That means it is necessary to look for the differences between different kinds of populism.

To distinguish between populists, specific variables have to be considered – such as ‘left’ and ‘right’. As the chapter’s focus is primarily on far-right populism (Wodak, KhosraviNik & Mral 2013), it tries to:

- Provide an overview of the populist far right’s defining other, that is, whom does the populist far right exclude from ‘us’.
- Underline the differences and similarities between the far right of the past and today’s far right.
- Stress that contemporary far-right populism does not confront democracy directly, but claims to defend it against specific enemies.
- Distinguish between far-right tendencies in societies and political systems, especially concerning their recent past outside or inside the ‘communist bloc’ defined by a one-party system of the Soviet type.

The far right: a conceptual history of far-right parties and movements in the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

The political meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is the product of the sitting order of the French parliament during the revolutionary period. Since then, ‘right’ has been a term to define the
position opposing radical reforms; ‘left’ became synonymous with deep reforms, be they based on a revolutionary – or an evolutionary – understanding of political strategies. In the Europe of the twenty-first century, the existence of party families – more or less transformed into European parties – followed that tradition. The European Parliament has given the left–right structure developed in national parliaments an all-European meaning (Almeida 2012). Left, respectively, far left indicates a socialist or communist position; right, respectively, far right stands for the different varieties of apolitical understanding based on ethnic or national identity.

Hannah Arendt and her ground-breaking study on totalitarianism underlined another systematic distinction: there are fundamentally shaped anti-democratic tendencies on the right as well as on the left. Arendt has summarised these tendencies, based on the evidence of Nazism and Stalinism (Arendt 1951). The knowledge of similarities between the systems identified with the names Hitler and Stalin has become deeper as a result of further research (see, e.g. Montefiore 2003; Mazower 2008). The similarities between the systems that made the most significant impact on the twentieth century do not imply that the two can be seen as identical: Marxism-Leninism has been a doctrine based on European Enlightenment. Leninism – an interpretation of Marxism – included a cosmopolitan and humanitarian core, despite being used by the century’s two most dreadful regimes. Nazism was, in its very essence, the principle antithesis to this core.

It has been the reality of personalised dictatorship without any kind of checks and balances that was the common denominator distinguishing the two totalitarian traditions from any democratic systems based on a universal understanding of basic human rights. Contemporary far-left and far-right political parties are still bound by opposing such democracies – even if they are not in the programmatic tradition of Nazism and Stalinism. This of course means that the moderate, anti-authoritarian forces left of centre (e.g. social democratic or green parties) and the moderate forces right of centre (e.g. Christian democratic or liberal parties) share a common distinction from the extremists of both left and right. The European Union, the product of the centrist forces of moderate parties, has to face the more-or-less principled opposition of the far left and the far right (Pelinka 2015).

Among the political traditions and parties to be considered ‘right’ in Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century, significant distinctions have to be made. Beginning with post-1945 development in Europe, significant parties of the politically conservative right parties became forerunners of liberal democracy – such as the Italian, French, and (West-) German Christian democrats (DC, MRP, CDU, respectively). In some cases, the moderate-right parties became a ‘hegemonic party’ – but always with a clear distinction from the fascist dictators of the past. (Sartori 2005, pp. 204–216) And when the French Fifth Republic started in 1958 as a project distinctly designed by the political right (Charles De Gaulle and his party), Gaullist France stayed within the framework of the French republican tradition and did not fulfil some expectations of turning France into a fascist system.

This ‘centrist’ or moderate part of the political right was challenged from the very beginning by rightist parties positioned outside the liberal-democratic mainstream of post-1945 Western Europe: post- or neo-fascist parties such as the Italian MSI (Italian Social Movement) or the French Poujadists, who became the forerunners of the Front National. Despite significant elements of revisionism, of pre-democratic and fascist nostalgia, the stability of Europe’s liberal democracies started to suck the more traditional right-wing extremists into the competitive party system that defines liberal democracies. In 2000, neo-fascism has ceased to be of any significance in Italy. The right spectrum of Italian politics became dominated by Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, which – regarding its electorate and
its foreign and European policies – was more the successor of the Christian democrats than of the neo-fascists. By taking over the role of political dominance for the right of centre, Forza Italia did not have to deal with the competition of the traditional moderates of the old Christian democrats, nor with the old (neo-)fascists, but with the regional, tentatively secessionist populism of the Lega Nord (Ruzza & Balbo 2013).

In France, Poujadism has been replaced by the Front National, which represents probably the most instructive case of the new time of European far-right extremism: the Front National is not nationalistic in the traditional sense, not playing (for example) the anti-German card; it is also not representing the anti-republican resentments that dominated Vichy-France. The Front National is – in a broader sense – republican and egalitarian by excluding those who are not truly French from its understanding of ‘us’. The Front National represents the anti-elitist character of the populist far right, criticising traditional elites of destroying France’s national identity by opening the French state as well as society to mass immigration (Beauzamy 2013).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Europe’s far right is different from the far right so typical for most of the twentieth century. The far-right parties have stopped being ‘reactionary’ in the traditional sense. They do not defend any ‘ancient regime’ against the forces of democracy. They, rhetorically, have turned around the old discourses. They are against elites – especially against elites representing the ‘demos’, the people. The new far right claims to speak on behalf of the people against those who (according to the populist rhetoric) have betrayed the people.

The new far right even defends basic values identified with democracy, and defends civic and human rights. The Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), in the tradition of Pim Fortuyn, claims to articulate the interests of women, principles of free speech and religious freedom – against the perceived danger coming from migrants with an Islamic background (Oudenampsen 2013). This new far right tries to portray itself as the main defender of a civilisation based on enlightenment. It is not the values and principles enshrined in the PVV’s (and other far-right parties’) programmatic declaration. It is the ethnically exclusive – and in that respect, xenophobic – and at least indirectly, potentially racist character that allows qualifying parties (such as the PVV) as right-wing extremists.

This is in many respects a long way from the anti-democratic far right of the past, such as the Catholic ‘Ultra-Montanists’ who fought French republicanism in the name of the pope, Russian (and other) aristocrats who were unable to accept the idea of progress as articulated in even the moderate liberal attitudes of Alexis de Tocqueville, all the reactionaries – reactionaries in the original meaning – who saw the modern evil in the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This kind of far right may exist today, but it does not have any significant impact.

The European far right of the first decades of the twentieth century – a far right for which the term ‘fascism’ has been used as an umbrella concept, despite the vagueness of the rather volatile reality – used some techniques of mass democracy to destroy democracy. These included mass parties mobilising significant numbers of people, representatives in parliament to undermine parliament, and – especially – a rather new understanding of ‘them’: the people was not the enemy, but rather, foreign peoples. Fascism stood for an ethnic and national exclusiveness within newly established democracies, using democratic instruments against democratic principles (Mudde 2007; Müller 2011, pp. 91–124).

‘Right’ in political terms has always been seen as opposition to any egalitarian agenda. It may have been enlarging the right to vote and bringing what used to be called ‘the lower classes’ as well as women, into the political arena in an active role, or may it have been
defending the privileges of birth and property against any kind of reform labelled liberal or socialist. The right defended the status quo, or even tried – fulfilling the real meaning of the term ‘reactionary’ – to return to the status quo ante.

This started to change in the twentieth century. The Italian fascists represented a kind of nationalistic egalitarianism and its German cousin was now called the ‘National Socialist Party’; the party was not just a traditional right-wing bourgeois party promoting extreme reactionary policies. In promoting ‘völkischen Sozialismus’ (ethnically exclusive socialism), the party spoke on behalf of a significant part of the German working-class electorate – blue-collar voters who believed they had reason to prefer Hitler’s party to social democrats or communists (Falter 1991).

The fascists of the early twentieth century represented a tendency not to see ‘class’ as the decisive cleavage of the time – as the defenders of the ‘ancient regime’ and the different socialist factions did. The fascists declared ‘nation’ and (or) ‘race’ as the defining conflict of the time. And in some respects, this has not much changed for the far right of the early twenty-first century. The ‘defining other’ is not the revolutionary at home; it is the foreigner – or whoever is branded as foreign – that is the enemy against whom ‘we’ have to defend ourselves.

The far right of today does not use the blatant racism as has been the case in the past. ‘The others’ are not defined by biological fantasies such as the Jewish race, or by superficial misinterpretations of skin colour. ‘The others’ are defined by characteristics such as ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’ (Wodak 2013). On the surface, the exclusion of ‘the others’ is usually accompanied by promises of respect for the otherness – as long as they abstain from coming to ‘us’.

To justify the construction of a principal difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, specific narratives are used to define a specific nation (Serbia, Hungary, Greece, or others) as the bulwark of Christian or European civilisation against the forces of darkness (Moguls, Muslims, Communists, or others). In this role, ‘we’ have been not much thanked by our neighbours, ‘we’ have not been the perpetual victims of the onslaught from the real enemies, and ‘we’ are not respected in our role as victims. The self-perception of being permanently the victim is a narrative used by nationalistic parties in general, and by right-wing populist parties in particular, and it serves as a significant motivation for historical revisionism (Kopecek 2008).

As the example of the Hungarian Jobbik Party demonstrates, it is especially in the former communist parts of Europe where a kind of old-fashioned, revisionist nationalism (plus a traditional racism directed against ‘Jews’ and ‘Roma’) co-exists with the kind of grass-roots democratic claim that contemporary populism represents (Kovács 2013). The ‘own’ nation is the victim of deeply unjust treaties of the past, the nation has no right to fight against the consequences of those treaties, nor to ask to undo them. At the same time, the search is on for culprits living within the ‘own’ nation; traditional scapegoats who easily can be defined as agents of foreign interests.

Specific interpretations of historical events (from the battle of Kosovo in the late Middle Ages to the Treaty of Trianon 1920) help to underline a specific identity. By defining ‘us’ as the permanent victim, it simplifies inclusion as well as exclusion: Over centuries, there seems to be a tradition of enemies to conspire and to act against ‘us’.

The research on political parties in Central-Eastern Europe has put much emphasis on the ‘nationalist-cosmopolitan’ divide, on the gap between the renaissance of nationalist narratives, more or less suppressed by communist rule for decades, and an orientation on transnational values as exemplified by the European Union (Kitschelt, Mansfeldova,
Markowski & Tóka 1999, pp. 223–260) The revival of nationalist tendencies (an unavoidable result of democratic transformation) opens a field for populist tendencies as they already existed in Western Europe. The former communist part of Europe, for decades not integrated in the European integration process, which aimed from its very beginning in the 1950s to overcoming nationalism, is now the region in which a more traditional, revisionist nationalism is allied with populism (Havlík & Pinková 2012, pp. 17–38).

The old (fascist) far right had one common denominator despite all the differences between nations and nationalisms: antisemitism. ‘Jews’ were constructed as the ‘defining others’ of those who constructed themselves as true members of a nation or people. Even the communist regimes used this stereotype immediately after 1945 when, in Czechoslovakia, Rudolf Slansky and other victims of the Stalinisation process were called ‘cosmopolitans’ – a code word for Jews (Applebaum 2013, pp. 281–283). The contemporary far right is still anti-cosmopolitan – even if in some regions (especially in Western Europe) the traditional antisemitism plays a significantly lesser role than in the past, or in some other regions (such as contemporary Central-Eastern Europe).

The old far right can still be seen in the rhetoric of the contemporary far right – in the construction of a seemingly self-evident ‘us’ and ‘them’. In her programmatic declaration, Marine Le Pen – co-president of the ENF-group (Europe of Nations and Freedom) in the European Parliament – declared: ‘Day after day, the Europe of Brussels reveals its deadly plan: to deconstruct the nation states in order to create a new globalised order, one that threatens the security, prosperity, identity and survival of the peoples of Europe.’

This is the very essence of contemporary far-right thinking and strategy – a constructed ‘other’ (‘the Europe of Brussels’), a devilish conspiracy (‘deadly plan’), and the simplified acceptance of ‘nation’ and ‘people’.

**Populism: a theoretical explanation of a specific understanding of democracy**

Populism is a vague concept. Populist tendencies, populist thinking, populist traditions have been, and still are, part of the history of democracy. Populism *per se* is not directed against democracy. The term has become a synonym for far-right tendencies that claim they are not anti-democratic, but represent the ‘true’ understanding of democracy.

Yves Mény and Yves Surel raise the question of whether populism should not be seen as the ‘pathology of democracy’: an essential democratic phenomenon going out of control (Mény & Surel 2002, pp. 3–7).

In the past, the far right as it existed in the form of fascist parties – especially the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) – have been outspoken against the basic principles of democracy. The traditional far right opposed any understanding of universal basic rights as enshrined in the tradition of enlightenment expressed by the declarations of the American and French revolutions. The populist far right argues that contemporary democracy in the liberal (‘Western’) system has fallen victim to elitist tendencies. The populist far right argues that it is necessary to defend the essence of democracy against elites.

This argument is, of course, not typical for the far right. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Robert Michels used it to describe democratically elected representatives becoming oligarchies without violating the rules of democracy (Michels 1911). And this criticism was considered more ‘leftist’ than ‘rightist’.

The far-right populism is characterised by two ‘defining others’. On one side, it mobilises against ‘them above’ – against ruling parties, against the powerful few in society and the
economic sphere. On the other side, it mobilises against ‘them below’ – against ethnic minorities, against migrants, against any segment in society that can be pictured as ‘foreign’. The first front against ‘them’ is not exclusively owned by far-right traditions. It is also used by leftist tendencies. It is the bridge between the populism of the far right and the populism of the left. It is the second front against ‘them’ that gives the populist far right its distinct flavour.

Contemporary populism is – differently from anti-democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian movements and parties from the past – not per se anti-democratic. The claim populist parties of the twenty-first century have is to represent ‘true’ democracy as can be seen in the cases of the Sweden Democrats and the ‘True Finns’ (Freeland 2013; Oja & Mral 2013). Populist parties criticise the existing structures and institutions of liberal political systems as being democratic in name only. Populist parties want to be seen as the ‘real’ democratic parties.

Concerning right-wing populist parties, this is linked to an outspoken, or at least implicit, ethnic exclusiveness: ‘the people’ consists of persons from the ‘own nation’. Excluded from the ‘own’ ethnic group are usually minorities who are seen as not ‘really belonging’ to ‘the people’ – such as Jews or Roma – and especially migrants who seem not to be fully assimilated into the cultural/religious mainstream, such as Muslims in Europe (Wodak 2015).

Populism speaks on behalf of the majority, even if representing only a minority of the electorate. The consequence of this imagined, perceived role as advocates of the majority is a strong preference for plebiscitarian techniques and an open mistrust directed against the institutions of representative democracies, such as parliaments. Of course, this has an old tradition: Robert Dahl’s analysis of the beginning of US-American democracy distinguished between what he called ‘Madisonian Democracy’ – a system based on representation with a significant degree of mistrust directed against ‘the masses’ and ‘Populist Democracy’ – opposing all or most representative institutions (Dahl 1970).

Ernst Fraenkel defined the mainstream understanding of democratic theory: a stable democracy must keep a balance between representative democratic institutions and plebiscitarian instruments, such as referenda. Fraenkel’s argument against a pure plebiscitarian understanding of democracy is especially based on historical evidence, on the manipulation of direct (pseudo-) democratic methods by anti-democratic forces such as the German NSDAP (Fraenkel 1964).

It is also part of the dominant understanding of democracy that democracy cannot be reduced to the rule of majority. Any democracy has to be based on a combination of majority rule and minority rights, which have to be guaranteed beyond the decisions and interests of the majority. In their understanding of democracy, right-wing populist parties tend to neglect this aspect of democratic theory: respect for minorities, be they ethnic, religious or political minorities in a pluralistic polity (Müller 2011). This is the consequence of a simplistic understanding of ‘demos’, the democratic sovereign. Populism tends to construct ‘the people’ as a homogenous entity whose ‘nature’ seems to be undermined by specific (especially external) enemies. Populism – especially right-wing populism – tends to identify ‘the people’ as a body with one dominating (national) interest. Deviant interests and opinions are considered either the results of ‘wrong conscience’, or even the expression of a fully illegitimate agenda, orchestrated by an evil conspiracy.

The group ‘Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy’ in the European Parliament formulates in its charter: ‘…the group subscribes to the concept of direct democracy believing it to be the ultimate check on political elites’. This simplified understanding of democracy as an unlimited rule of the majority is representative for the populism of the far right.
Identity politics: the aspect of inclusion and exclusion with particular reference to the ethno-nationalistic (racist) tendencies of the far right

Every political movement is the result of cleavages, of conflict lines, running through any society. Every party that has risen to some success has – and still is – positioning itself on one side of this line. And any position implies a certain understanding of identity. In Europe, the late nineteenth century saw the rise of class parties, based on a specific view of social conflicts as first and foremost class conflicts. Religious parties at the same time defined themselves as opposition to a secular state seen as unfriendly to a specific religion – or as articulating the interests of one religious denomination against another. National parties justified their existence and their policies on the basic interests of one nation or nationality (Duverger 1959). In the late twentieth century, parties entered the political market in prosperous societies based on an ideological perspective – claiming to defend ‘nature’ against the life-threatening consequences of unlimited economic growth.

In all cases, identity was necessary to mobilise people along the line of conflict. The followers of a party had to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, any specific identity was not an objective given, but the subjective interpretation of a reality that was always open to a different interpretation. Identity has been – and is always – imagined, as Benedict Anderson (2006) has demonstrated with respect to national identities (Anderson 2006).

Identities are constructed; they are rising or declining – they can never be seen as permanent. What it means to be ‘Austrian’ has changed over the last hundred years – from imperial transnational to ethnic German-national to post-ethnic Austrian republican (Pelinka 1998). To have a ‘Yugoslav’ identity was a major factor during most of the twentieth century, but it has subsequently disappeared. The conflict between identities of Catholics and Protestants in the Netherlands dominated Dutch politics until the last decades of the twentieth century – it has not disappeared in the twenty-first century, but has lost most of its former political implications. The ‘pillarisation’ of Dutch politics – the system of segmental autonomy that gave Protestants as well as Catholics significant power to decide their own affairs – started to break down with the merger of the Catholic party and the two Protestant parties (Lijphart 1977, pp. 42–52).

Democracy is challenged by the contradiction between the normative assumption of an existing ‘demos’ and the reality of a society that is too complex to be defined by one criterion only – by ‘nation’, ‘culture’, or ‘religion’. Society can be seen – as David Lloyd George put it in 1917 – as a mass, ‘more or less molten and you can stamp upon that molten mass almost anything as long as you do it with firmness and determination.’ (quoted in Müller 2011, p. 7) In any society, there is a strong urge to define the self, to be a specific self, to seek an identity. The search for identity implies the exclusion of others – or better – of social segments defined as others.

Populism – any kind of populism – tends to play down the complexities of identities in society. ‘Us’ is declared as a given – ‘us’ as a nation or a religious denomination or as a ‘race’ or as a class. The phenomenon of cross-cutting identities as seen (for example) in Switzerland where cleavages run across each other (e.g. linguistic–ethnic cleavages cutting through religious cleavages) not only reflects the reality of complex societies, but helps to bridge the deep gaps running through a country. Another case of how cross-cutting cleavages help overcome simplistic identities is India where ethnic–linguistic and caste cleavages are creating an identity mix that helps to promote social integration (Lijphart 1977). Populist attitudes reduce such complexities – they favour a clear distinction between one identity and...
another. By trying to force people to opt for one identity or the other, populism endangers integration across social differences.

Yesterday’s far right was based on national identities separated from each other. Polish nationalists perceived Russian or German nationalists as their main enemy. Today’s far right is based on a more complex, potentially transnational identity. The French Front National (FN) no longer sees Germany as the arch enemy of France. The Dutch PVV is not afraid of the Netherlands being dominated by a mighty neighbour state. Front National, PVV and other right-wing populist parties claim more and more to defend ‘Western civilisation’, ‘liberal democracy’, or basic human (e.g. female) rights, not against other European nations, but against a defining other not associated with a specific nation or state: It may be Islam, or it may be migrants with a specific skin colour or just a perceived specific culture.

Populism of any kind is based on the tentatively naïve and simplistic understanding of an objectively given identity. Right-wing populism as it currently exists, especially in the European party systems, may have broken with the old-fashioned, pre-Second World War nationalism that set one nation against another. But one element – perhaps the decisive element of this nationalism – still does exist: the defence of national sovereignty. The contemporary far right in Europe may be able to form an all-European front against immigrants coming from outside Europe. But this has not – at least not yet – resulted in a common far-right policy within the European Union. Right-wing populist parties gained substantially at the 2014 European Parliament elections.

Soon after the elections of 2014, the far-right parties were able to form a party group within the European Parliament (EP): ‘Europe of Nations and Freedom’ (ENF/ENL). The founding members were the French FN, the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Italian Lega Nord, and the Flemish (Belgian) Vlaams Belang. Outside this group, another partly similar group exists in the EP – ‘Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy’, with membership comprising the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Italian Five Star Movement. These parties are – not incidentally – not from the former communist part of Europe. Some of the parties (the Vlaams Belang and the Lega Nord) are more concerned with a separatist agenda, but all are united in their opposition to the EU’s ongoing deepening and to the European integration process: national identity (be it Flemish or French) must dominate and must be above European identity.3

The sovereignty narrative prevents the far-right populist parties from seeing European integration as a possibility for promoting a far-right agenda. This is still a British message coming from the UKIP, a Swedish message coming from the Sweden Democrats and a Hungarian message coming from Jobbik. And despite some common elements – as can be seen in the somewhat pro-Russian policies these parties promote regarding the crisis (and the war) in Ukraine – the far-right populist parties oppose integration as exemplified by the EU because they see the Union (and rightly so) as an important step away from the nation-state they still want to defend.

The European Union as an attempt to overcome the disasters nationalism has been responsible for in the past challenges by its very existence the assumption of a ‘naturally’ given identity along national lines. The emerging European identity, which the European integration process is built upon, is anathema to the parties of the populist far right – as it would have been for the traditional nationalist far-right parties of the first half of the twentieth century (Bruter 2005, pp. 23–40).
Contemporary issues

Politics in the twenty-first century is defined by the end of the clearly definable bipolar world of the Cold War. From the viewpoint of the ‘West’, defined as the two sides of the North Atlantic, the world is particularly influenced by the rising significance of new major players (especially the BRICS states: Brazil, Russia, China, India, South Africa), by the absence of any general explaining pattern, but – clearly – by the decline of the state as the sovereign organisation of human society. The state, as has been known since the Peace of Westphalia 1648, is less and less able to control the consequences of globalisation. The system defined in 1648 as an international order under the control of sovereign states has come to an end (Kissinger 2014, pp. 361–374).

The state – as it has been known – is the main, often repressive authority internally and also the independent actor, deciding over war and peace externally, but the state as an organisational type is in decline. The state’s decline is indicated by the phenomenon of wars within and beyond, but without, states. George W Bush’s ‘War on Terror’ was an attempt to bring a war against a phenomenon that was clearly not a state into a traditional terminology. Wars in the Middle East, like the different – and at the same time parallel – wars devastating countries such as Syria and Iraq are wars that state governments seem unable to control.

The state’s decline can also be seen in the difficulties that the democratic welfare state has run into. The state’s capability to preserve internal social peace by combining economic growth and mass prosperity – as developed especially in European countries such as Sweden and the United Kingdom in the twentieth century – seems to be less and less able to guarantee near full employment as well as paying for everybody’s social security.

The reason is economic globalisation. Economic interests have been able to emancipate themselves from governments still bound by territorial limitations. The globalised economy has become stateless, but politics is still state-based. If a corporation thinks it can increase its profit in another region, it will leave the state’s territory in which it has prospered for some time in the past. The result is an increasing inequality, especially in the economically better developed, more prosperous parts of the world – in Europe and in North America.

This is the main source of the social unrest that populism (especially right-wing populist parties) articulates. They use their message of national exclusiveness (‘us’) to mobilise the ‘modernisation losers’. In the more prosperous parts of today’s world, ‘modernisation losers’ are particularly the less prosperous social segments; those which can be called working class and lower-middle class. The high degree of unemployment in Europe (greater than the United States is experiencing) reflects national governments’ inability to guarantee the welfare state’s social network.

Populism defines the result of the declining capacity of national governments per se, not as the inability of mainstream political elites, but their unwillingness. In the view of populist rhetoric, the price the lower classes have to pay is the result of elitist class egoism – and not of structural changes in an increasingly globalised economy. Right-wing populism adds to this perspective a significant flavour of ethnic (national) flavour: The structural weaknesses of governments are defined as the product of an alliance of national elites and transnational interests. National elites accept or even promote immigration as an instrument for their rule over the domestic electorate.

This is the case in countries with a comparatively high degree of social security, that is, the countries of Western and Northern Europe. Working-class people in those countries react to decreasing government power not by moving to the left, but to the right.
There is an institutional factor, which as an independent variable, influences the impact that far-right populism has. In the US, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the Tea Party demonstrated its mobilising energy by focusing on topics that fit broadly into the concept of far-right populism: a combination of anti-elitist and indirectly xenophobic (anti-immigrant) messages, plus an insistence on defending the core values of liberal democracy, such as women’s basic rights (Wodak 2013, p. 28). However, the US Tea Party is not a party in the sense of competing with other parties for votes. The Tea Party is a (neo)conservative lobby within an existing party, the Republican Party, and competes for influence with other interest groups – especially before and during the Republican primaries. As the US electoral system on both state and federal levels is a system of ‘first past the post’, giving victory to any candidate with the plurality of votes, the US-party system denies third parties a realistic chance of succeeding at the polls. What can be called the US equivalent of European far-right populist parties tries taking over an existing party – and not to compete within an existing party system that has proven quite stable due to the specificities of the US electoral system.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the far-right parties articulate in different form an anti-Western resentment. This resentment may be directed against different ‘others’, depending on the specific national narratives. And, different to today’s West European far right, the post-communist countries are still (or again) the region where traditional anti-Jewish and anti-Roma prejudices can be mobilised for political purposes (Mudde 2005). However, the West and the East European far right have one common enemy – the concept of a United Europe that limits the interpretation of a fully sovereign nation-state as well as any simplified understanding of national ‘purity’.

Conclusion

Contemporary far-right populism tends to abstain from openly racist positions. Additionally, today’s populist far right has made its peace with the mainstream understanding of democracy – at least on paper. Parties such as the French FN or the Dutch PVV accept the principle of free and fair elections, and even defend basic freedoms such as the freedom of speech – at least rhetorically. It is their exclusionary understanding of democracy that stands for continuity between the extremist right of the past (‘fascism’) and the populist far right of today.

The definition of ‘us’ in the far-right policies of today is based on cultural exclusiveness bordering on ‘biological’ exclusiveness. Using migration as a central topic to construct the image of a rather homogenous society (‘us’) threatened by a foreign ‘them’ ignores the complexities of present societies and sees the reality of globalisation with its unavoidable aspect of transnational and transcontinental mobility as a danger that can be fought off by building walls to fight off ‘the others’.

The need to define criteria of inclusion and exclusion is part of any democratic order. According to the mainstream understanding of democracy, this has to be done in a way that is consistent with universal human rights and especially without any discrimination based on gender, religion, ‘race’, ethnicity, mental or physiological disability, generation or sexual orientation. This is best summed up in Robert Dahl’s concept of ‘citizenship as a categorical right’ in its ‘modified’ version: ‘Every adult subject to a government and its laws must be presumed to be qualified as, and has the unqualified right to be, a member of the demos’ (Dahl 1989, p. 127).

Right-wing populism is not a quality allowing for a clear distinction between populist parties and non-populist parties, between parties incompatible with liberal democracies and
parties fully fitting into such systems. As can be seen in cases such as the UK and France, parties of the political mainstream will be tempted to take over some elements of the exclusionary rhetoric and policies of the far right as soon as such an integration of far-right positions is seen to be promising for the electoral outcome.

Notes
1 Available from: www.enfgroup-ep.eu/.

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