



IED - YDE Winter Academy 2018

The Future of the European Union. What Challenges ahead?

14 – 15 December 2018

Brussels, Thon Hotel EU

Populists in power: an assessment

Briefing note for the Winter Academy 2018

December 2018

by Mathieu Baudier, IED Scientific Committee

The sole liability of this note rests with the author, and does imply any endorsement by the IED, the EDP or the European parliament.

In 2018, the question is not anymore on whether and how populists could reach power. They have already, in a number of countries. This offers the possibility to assess their policies and trajectories, in reality and not only as a potential.

- **Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party in Hungary are certainly the most dangerous and worrying.** This is because Mr Orbán is a brilliant politician, who has an articulated vision (given his career, whether he sincerely believes in it is another question), and is very realistic about what he can achieve and about the standing of his country. His stated goal of transforming Hungary into an “illiberal democracy” is in clear contradiction with the EU’s values. But Fidesz has repeatedly won elections and now has a huge majority in parliament which allows it to change the constitution. Oligarchs close to Mr Orbán have cynically benefited from his hold on power (notably by misappropriating EU funds) and reinforce it in turn. Last but not least, at the European level, Hungary and Fidesz get covered on the one hand by Poland, when unanimity against them would be required in the Council, and on the other hand by the European People Party (EPP), the biggest group in the European parliament, which is still unwilling to expel the populist party. Viktor Orbán position therefore appears strong and sustainable, a real tumour at the heart of Europe.
- In Poland, the PiS party led by Jarosław Kaczyński is in a similar position. Their position in parliament is strong (though not overwhelming), the opposition is weak, and opinion polls show that they command a lot of support. **Interestingly, Poland is still one of the country with the highest support for EU membership** (87% want to stay vs. 13% who want to leave, according to a Kantar poll from September 2018). While there are serious and dangerous developments, especially with regards to the independence of the judiciary, which has triggered a procedure at EU level, the strength and sustainability of this strain of populism seems very related to the national context and, again, the skills and experience of a leader.

- **Italy offers a mixed picture.** The Five Stars Movement is the first genuine “insurgent” movement of the 21st century to reach power in a major country, with an approach leveraging internet, and in total contradiction with the political traditions of their home country. This is a significant achievement, and they seem to have genuinely struck a chord with a part of the population, especially people disaffected from politics. It is therefore interesting to observe and analyse this party coldly, in order to separate demagoguery from potentially positive political innovation. But their accession to power shows one of the limit and danger of populism: because of their culture of disruption of the established order, they did not hesitate to ally with a far-right party with fascist roots and tendencies, the Northern League. Since the election, this party and even more its leader Matteo Salvini have greatly benefited in the polls compared to their election result, with a shameless xenophobic and racist discourse, which is in a sense nothing new in Europe. **Irresponsible and somewhat naive populism can open the way for old-fashioned but dangerous authoritarianism and strongman rule.**
- Last but not least, **Brexit can be seen as populism coming to power.** All ingredients (lies, fake news on internet, unsustainable promises, rampant xenophobia, scorning of the technocratic “experts” and the elites, divide between big vibrant cities and abandoned countrysides and industrial wastelands, etc.) are present, and have caused the most significant change of course of British history in decades. But here, there is no skilled leader, and, to say the least, this has brought politics to a state of complete mess. Boris Johnson is not an Orbán, Kaczyński, or a Salvini. He, or any other of the top Brexiteers, is sufficiently cunning and patient to benefit, and have a clique around them benefiting, from the consequences of the populist wave they have created.

From this brief overview one can deduce two observations:

- Let’s not forget that **populism is a catch-all term.** This is not necessarily pejorative, because this term still captures a broad dynamic. This dynamic has no clear shape because it is a reaction to the weakness and decadence of liberal democracy and consumerist capitalism, rather than a structured and coherent ideological movement as such. But one should never forget that each of the situations where they have reached power is very dependent of a given national context and the right mix of leadership or innovation.
- **The success and sustainability of populism in power often relies on a strong and skilled leader.** There is a similarity with the United States where Donald Trump succeeded in rallying a massive popular support around his person, whereas related insurgencies such as the Tea Party had stayed for years amorphous and rather weak in practical terms. This reliance on a leader is certainly the biggest danger of the current populism wave. As the rise and consolidation of Vladimir Putin in Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey have shown, the evolution from populist leader to strongman is not clear-cut, and very hard to reverse. On the other hand, this is also their biggest weakness and a factor for instability.