Understanding populism: What role do crises play in the growth of Euroscepticism?

*Three distinct crises have hit the European Union in the last decade: the Great Recession, the migration crisis, and Brexit. As **Andrea L. P. Pirro** explains, there has been a widespread assumption that populist parties with Eurosceptic profiles have been the main political beneficiaries from these crises. But there still remains much to be understood about what populists make out of such crises, as well as their impact on Euroscepticism.*

The waking of the populist giant has become a contemporary mantra. Since the breakout of the Great Recession, non-academic observers have often subscribed to alarmist views regarding a populist backlash in advanced democracies. But various kinds of populist forces have in fact become permanent fixtures of European party systems over the past two decades, suggesting a more balanced outlook on the relationship between populism and 'crisis' is called for.

A recent cross-national study covering 17 European countries has already cast doubt on the notion of clear and homogenous elements propelling the fortunes of populist parties in the shadow of the Great Recession. And yet, addressing crises as mere background conditions seems to tell us little about what populists actually make out of such crises. A forthcoming special issue of *Politics*, guest-edited by Paul Taggart, Stijn van Kessel, and myself, specifically delves into the relationship between populism, Euroscepticism, and crisis.

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The unfolding of the Great Recession, the migrant crisis, and Brexit posed serious challenges to the European status quo and the integration model propounded by EU elites. The specific breadth of these crises nonetheless offers important opportunities for students of populism. First, they helped elevate the concept of crisis to a central component in the analysis of populist discourse. What better occasion to bring 'crises' back into the analysis of populism than a prolonged period of crisis? Second, by making reference to crises that are European in character and scope, we could see how opposition to supranational elites fits into the discourse of crisis articulated by populist collective actors. In essence, we could monitor the evolution of populist Eurosceptic discourses as these crises unfolded. The underlying assumption is that, in the face of the recent European crises, anti-establishment forces might have an extra incentive to harden their Euroscepticism and, thus, blame the European elites on the basis of a composite (i.e. broader) set of arguments.

A first enquiry into the populist radical right's stances on 'Europe' showed no uniform reactions to the Great Recession. Taken together, populist radical right parties did not unanimously advocate withdrawal from the single currency, nor the EU. While most parties were indeed seen to harden their Eurosceptic stances, very few went as far as advocating exit from the EU. Most notably, however, the economic and financial crises prompted members of this party family to move beyond their cultural framing of European integration and centre their criticism (also) on socioeconomic arguments. By shifting the focus on the broader set of (left-wing, centrist, and right-wing) populist parties, and extending our enquiry to all three crises, we could a) see how the EU is used in the critical and oppositional discourse of populist actors; and b) establish if and how these discourses have reverberated across the party-political arena.

The varying nature of the crises reflected differently on the populist framings of 'Europe'. Populists criticised the EU for the harmful socioeconomic consequences of austerity; the threat to national sovereignty, security, or cultural homogeneity posed by non-EU migrants; the upholding of a distant and undemocratic system of governance; or a combination of the above.

The different crises thus expanded the range of Eurosceptic frames typically employed by populist parties, allowing them to intensify or highlight their Eurosceptic arguments and to adapt their framing of European integration as each crisis unfolded (see the table below for a categorisation of populist Eurosceptic frames). Even so, left-wing populists preserved the socioeconomic framing of their Euroscepticism. Conversely, the Great Recession offered right-wing populists the opportunity to elaborate on similar discourses, only to return to a cultural framing of Euroscepticism at the peak of the migration crisis. The M5S in Italy had been one case of a populist party flirting with cultural framings beyond clearer left-wing and right-wing ideological distinctions.

Table: Populist Eurosceptic frame categorisation

Socioeconomic	Economic and financial arguments, fiscal sovereignty, banks, bail-outs, national debt, Euro
Cultural	Immigration, multiculturalism, Christianity, Islam, security
Sovereignty	Delocalisation, transfer of decision-making, centralisation
Legitimacy	Democratic deficit, effectiveness, competence, corruption

Source: **Pirro and Van Kessel (2018)**

In terms of impact, the mainstream remained remarkably resilient against populist Euroscepticism. The cases of higher impact had been those most affected by the economic crisis, or Brexit – as in the case of the UK. In these cases, populist Eurosceptics had been either able to instigate competition on 'Europe' or leave a mark by means of the specific weight gained within respective party systems (e.g. Portugal and Spain).

Although the three crises helped increase the relevance of European affairs in public debates, we should not be too quick to assume that the EU and European integration have automatically turned into the central battleground for political contestation. This holds for populists and non-populists alike, who still fall short of placing 'Europe' at the core of their concerns. As a result, we should not uncritically treat the advancements of populist Eurosceptic forces as a metric of public disenchantment with the EU. Instead, we should treat them as an ever-louder alarm signalling growing fatigue with traditional parties and established politics, which may have proven to be unprepared, or unfit, to respond to the serious challenges posed by multiple crises.

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