

Populists chairing the European Commission and Parliament

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Jan Komárek Do 30 Jun 2016

No, the title of this post does not refer to a dystopia to come after the next European elections in 2019. It refers to the two presidents of today – Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz. Now why can they be seen as populists in some plausible way? In my view, this is because of the way in which they see politics and the role of the “people” in it.

The day after the referendum both Juncker and Schulz pressed for the UK to trigger the Article 50 TEU procedure as quickly as possible. Schulz was reported to have consulted EP lawyers how this could happen even in the absence of a formal notification from the UK government. Juncker, in turn, wants UK members of EP out of the assembly soon and acts as if the UK is not a member of the EU anymore – e.g. by not using English in his official communications anymore. The British people have spoken and that is the end of the matter, they seem to suggest.

For a populist the „will of the people“ is the ultimate source of authority – no matter what legal provisions and political conventions may have to say. I know this a very crude understanding of populism, which would put Orbán and Kaczyński very close to any supporter of the idea of direct democracy. But it is an understanding of populism now very much current in certain circles, which want to delegitimize any opposition to certain EU policies as “populist”, if made in the name of the people – such as the Greek Syriza or the Spanish Podemos.

In reality, however, there is no pure „will of the people“. It is always moderated and mediated, if only through [how](#) the matter is put to people’s decision, or by how „the people“ is/are to be understood. Note how controversial it is, from the UK constitutional perspective, to speak of the will of the British people, [rather than the will of the four nations that constitute the UK](#). And we do not even need to mention that in the UK Parliament is sovereign, not the people, and the Brexit referendum is not, purely formally speaking, binding on the former.

Democratic politics is a means to transform the „will of the people“ into political action. It does so through legal procedures, political conventions and also with some social imagination, which allows individuals to think of themselves as part of a larger collective. As a result, the will of the people may be subjected to the sovereignty of Parliament or the supremacy of the constitution as expressed in the judgment of a constitutional court. In my view, constitutional representative democracy is by far a much more sophisticated instrument of politics, if compared to government by referendum, which leaves little room for moderation, but much space for manipulation. Consider how important it is for some Brexiters [to construe the referendum as not being \(primarily\) about immigration](#) to allow future compromises necessary to get access to the Single Market.

Populists ignore all these nuances – they use the voice of the people for their own purposes. I believe it is not in the best EU’s interest to rush things up – no matter how little sympathy I have for those, who will most likely lead the negotiations on the part of the UK (and of course, no matter how sorry I am for the result of the referendum). But for once, the German Chancellor’s calm stance (some call it [procrastination](#) or simply “merkeln”) should be applauded – at least until the UK constitutional politics has its way. And it will serve the EU well to deal with its own populists, if it ever wants to become democratic and closer to its people.

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