It would be dangerous to view modern European populism as a triumph of style over substance

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The success of populist and Eurosceptic parties was one of the key narratives to emerge from the European Parliament elections in May. **Ruth Wodak** *writes on the platforms which underpin these parties, noting that there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for why parties have gained ground in certain countries. Nevertheless she argues that it is difficult to predict where such a diverse range of movements will lead.*

The results of the elections to the European Parliament in May have caused great concern in the various national governments of European Union member states, as well as in the European organisations: although expected by opinion makers and predicted by opinion polls, it was nevertheless surprising that the French extreme right-wing populist party the Front National (FN) won first place in France (with just under 24.9 per cent) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) first place in the UK (with 27.5 per cent).

The electoral success of these two Eurosceptic, nationalistic/chauvinistic and xenophobic parties dominated media reactions across Europe and beyond, leading many politicians and journalists to proclaim the foreseeable end of the European Union. In the midst of such outcries, other results were neglected and contradictory tendencies overlooked.

For example, the Austrian extreme right-wing populist party Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) won fewer votes than expected and took third place (with around 20 per cent); in Italy Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party (which belongs to the Party of European Socialists) almost doubled its seats whereas the extreme right lost more than 50 per cent of theirs. In Sweden, the Socialists won the election and the governing conservative party lost more than 5 per cent; in Greece, the opposition left-wing Syriza gained over 22 per cent on its vote share from 2009. In Hungary, on the other hand, the extreme right-wing party Jobbik received just under 14.7 per cent.

Making sense of the success of populist parties

Obviously, we are dealing with contradictory tendencies across Europe that are not easily explained by North-South or East-West cleavages. It is also obvious that the economic crisis did not influence the elections to similar effects across Europe: Austria and Denmark belong to the richest countries of the world and have some of the most successful right-wing populist parties. In these cases, the Austrian chauvinism and Danish protectionism of their social welfare state are combined with xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim beliefs and strong scepticism towards the European Union. In other EU member states, however, the financial crisis certainly supported the emergence or re-emergence of parties similar to Neo-Nazi and fascist organisations (such as Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary) who both also employ physical violence against migrants, Jews, and Roma. The overall election was ultimately won by the European People's Party, albeit with massive losses, and the Party of European Socialists took second place.

Speculations about the reasons for such developments are manifold – they range from a purported broad disillusionment with politics *per se* and blaming governing parties for the global financial crisis, to discontentment with austerity politics and the growing gap between rich and poor. For most parties, the fear of migrants and asylum-seekers became a hegemonic agenda as well as a forceful argument for the necessity to protect the "Christian Occident" as a constitutive part of European identity. In other cases, old traditional anti-Semitic, racist and anti-Ziganist prejudices were functionalised in order to construct scapegoats wherever and whenever needed.

Furthermore, new media-savvy charismatic leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage or the FPÖ's HC Strache and their rhetoric are recognised as (at least a partial) cause of such success. And, finally, nationalistic oppositional interests were frequently played against governing parties and their politics – hence transforming the European elections into national elections. In short: there is no one explanation and no clear uni-directional development to be identified in such complex and contradictory results. Following the Dutch sociologist Dick Pels, it would be dangerous and wrong to regard modern populism as void of serious content or to reduce the new right-wing populism to a "frivolity of form, pose and style" and thus to downplay its outreach, its messages and resonance. Pels claims that "it is precisely through its dynamic mix of substance and style that populist politics has gained an electoral lead position in current media democracy".

Heinz-Christian 'HC' Strache, Credit: _dChris (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Extreme right-wing populist parties are united in their endorsement of a chauvinist, nativist view of 'the people', as well as by creating specific chauvinistic identity myths which idealise and rewrite history, and an anti-élistist, revisionist and anti-intellectual stance combined with strong Euroscepticism. Moreover, one can observe a tendency to favour plebiscitarian methods and to downplay representative democracy while proclaiming the search for "true democracy" and denouncing "formalistic democracy". Democracy should be reduced, such parties argue, to the majority rule of "the people". By triggering such debates, populism might – as political scientist Ernesto Laclau claims – possibly play a crucial role by re-politicising democracy. Of course, such parties struggle to define themselves in terms of who belongs to the respective "people" and who does not. Belonging usually implies nativist criteria rather than any kind of legal citizenship. In this way, the "real Austrians, Hungarians, British or Dutch" are juxtaposed to "Others" (foreigners, non-Christians).

However, the parties differ significantly in terms of their specific foci and historical as well as socio-political contexts: some parties gain support via an ambivalent relationship with fascistandNazi pasts (e.g. in Austria, Hungary, Italy, Romania and France); others focus primarily on a perceived threat from Islam (e.g. in the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland); some parties restrict their propaganda to a perceived danger to their national identities from ethnic minorities (e.g. in Hungary, Greece, Italy and the UK); and others primarily endorse a traditional Christian (fundamentalist) conservative-reactionary agenda (e.g. in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Russia). Consequently, there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for this complex phenomenon.

Europe's future

Predicting future developments as a consequence of the EU elections 2014 is, of course, difficult. The much-discussed attempt to form a transnational extreme right-wing Populist Party seems doomed to fail: the overtly nationalistic orientation of such movements does not lend itself to any transnational or even cosmopolitan alliance. The above-mentioned different historical traditions and agenda also seem to prohibit any easy coalition or alliance despite the existence of a common enemy – the European Union.

On the other hand, a continuous normalisation of exclusionary agenda can be observed: instead of positioning oneself clearly against agendas such as immigration restrictions, historical revisionism or anti-feminism, some mainstream parties in government accommodate right-wing populist agendas and integrate these into their programmes for fear of losing even more voters. In this way, they arguably opt for the wrong strategy as they will certainly not convince more liberal voters, but instead lose them. Nor will they win back any voters they have already

lost to the right-wing populist parties. Such a dynamic was clearly observed in Austria, for example, where many proposals of the FPÖ from 1992/1993 (for immigration restrictions and other policies), which were vehemently opposed by the governments in office during the 1990s, have since been implemented by the governing Grand Coalition.

It is also difficult to predict the consequence of the fact that European citizens were able to 'elect' the President of the Commission and the European Parliament for the first time. Many controversies among heads of state indicate that it seems to be very difficult to accept the vote of the European citizens and to have lost the privilege of negotiating important functions, strategies, and positions behind closed doors. These changes might lead to more transparency of decision-making processes and thus, to a revival of interest in European political processes.

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