EUROPE'S FUTURE: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON POPULISM

RESEARCH PAPER

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International Development Research Network
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Introduction

As countries across the world struggle to deal with the impacts of Covid-19, Europe faces another problem that does not seem to go away – Populism. The word may have taken a backseat for the time being, but the issue looks set to gain more prominence yet again due to the ongoing pandemic.

The rise of populist politics has grown exponentially since 2008, as the dynamic nature of globalisation has been exposed by political and economic crises such as the 2008 financial crash and the 2011 Eurozone crisis that have scarred Europe with instability and insecurity. Consequently, various forms of populism from those on the far-left, such as Podemos in Spain, and those on the far-right, such as National Rally in France, have benefitted from exposure of fragilities in the European project. Populist parties have tended to focus on and grow because of the latest international issues in the EU, such as in 2008 when populist politics focussed on the economic crisis and mass unemployment; or in 2011, following the exploding Eurozone crisis, when they emphasised the growing divide between Northern and Southern member states. Most recently, the discourse of populist politicians has centred around the migration crisis, an issue which is still far from being resolved despite the EU’s deal with Turkey to stem the flow of refugees.

Now we face populism with a fresh purpose and motivation – Covid-19. The Coronavirus has exposed the fragilities of open borders between states and far-right populist leaders have leapt at the opportunity to push their autocratic agenda. Across the Atlantic, the U.S president, a well-known “germaphobe”, has pointed to the flaws of the World Health Organisation for failing to contain the so-called “Chinese virus”. This blame game is a vote
winner for Trump, and we have seen it before as on the campaign trail in 2015, Trump warned of infectious diseases crossing the U.S border with Mexico. The coronavirus will only increase support for Trump’s vision of building the wall, and this will, in turn, inspire populist leaders around Europe.

The idea of creating more physical borders to lessen the effects of future pandemics is an attractive proposal, and indeed one that is likely to resonate with many voters. Similar promises to slow migration were successful during the Brexit campaign in 2016, when Eurosceptic advocates in the UK warned of 70 million Turkish Muslims joining the EU. It is clear that Trump’s continued blaming of the World Health Organization for not containing Covid-19 will only strengthen the arguments of European populists in France, Italy and Germany, all who desire a return to stricter border controls.

**Populism in Europe**

The EU faces the same challenges from populist leaders as in the US, with particular notability in Eastern Europe. For example, in Hungary, Victor Orban has used his two-thirds majority to pass emergency legislation in the Hungarian Parliament to allow him to rule without decree until the Covid-19 crisis is over. Orban has made a similar comparison to Trump’s connection with migration and the spread of disease, stating that “one front is called migration and the other one belongs to the coronavirus. There is a logical connection between the two as both spread with movement.”

This translation of populist ideals into autocratic behaviour is also visible in Poland, where the government has revised a 2008 act on preventing and combating infectious diseases which permits the government, rather than Polish regions, to declare an epidemic (and compulsory quarantine). The Polish government has been accused of introducing these measures to delay the scheduled presidential election, which was due in May, until three
months after the state of emergency has ended. The Polish government has a history of undermining democratic norms within Europe, and the new revised act in essence allows the central government to declare a state of emergency and postpone upcoming elections. The Polish government believes that a long delay to the elections would disadvantage Andrzej Duda, backed by the Law and Justice Party, who is the current favourite.

Covid-19 offers a chance for populist leaders to utilise extended state powers in a way that undermines the rule of law and democracy. The solution(s) these populists will advocate is a return to strict border controls to undermine coordination and cooperation across the EU member states. Covid-19 represents an opportunity for populist parties to become more popular within their respective countries as their rise mirrors the increasing number of border closures on a scale not seen since the Second World War. With EU member states such as Greece, Belgium, the Netherlands and Hungary temporarily suspending access to asylum seekers, this narrative has been hijacked by populist leaders under the guise of being a long-term necessity in preventing the spread of Covid-19 and future pandemics.

**Unsettling Times**

The lack of coordination from the EU since the start of the crisis has resulted in member states acting of their own accord. In Germany, borders with France were closed off without adequate coordination. Similar disarray was displayed in Italy, where the government decided to implement strict restrictions without coordination with other EU member states. This lack of organisation has resulted in a temporary end to the free movement of people which directly contradicts one of the founding principles of the EU.

Covid-19 reinforces the arguments of those that have long opposed integration and freedom of movement within the EU. The weak response from the 27-member states to Covid-19 will benefit the populist parties
across the EU who want an end to the Treaty of Rome. The populist discourse that will follow will be similar to that which we have heard before, but with a new and more powerful justification. Instead of seeing migrants as solely a threat to the economy, populists will use Covid-19 as an excuse to close borders to eradicate the threat of any future pandemic and for the safety of the global economy.

Such references to the “Chinese virus” will only help fuel fear, along with a global recession which will lead to mass unemployment across the continent. However, we must be cautious when trying to understand the reasons for the rise in populism, as they can vary. For example, after the 2008 financial crash, France had a surge of populism as their economy slumped into recession. However, Greece and Spain, who were hit the hardest by the financial crash, only had marginal increases in populist growth. A similar comparison can be found in the Czech Republic, where unemployment stands at 2.0%, the lowest rate in the EU, along with high levels of economic growth. However, despite these positive economic indicators, populist parties won over 40% in the 2017 elections, a tenfold increase from 1998.

However, despite varying causes for their creation, the main populist parties across Europe all share a chauvinist nationalism and opposition to globalisation in its many forms. The repercussions of Covid-19 will be an excuse for populist parties to stand on a platform which advocates the protection of the 500+ million EU citizens as paramount to European survival. While economists and think tanks project future scenarios from Covid-19 (many of which offer negative forecasts), these unsettling times will generate a social narrative of fear that populist leaders will play on.

**Europe’s Response**

While there are many issues with populism, the one that originates from Covid-19 is the inadequate solutions that these parties propose. The notion
of ending of freedom of movement would undoubtedly suppress Europe’s ability to coordinate on future efforts. Right now, some of Europe’s biggest pharmaceutical firms are collaborating to help produce a vaccine despite being rivals in the European market.

Europe’s ability to coordinate on efforts is an enhanced strength of Europe’s solidarity. For example, the UK is set to lose access to the EU’s €100bn Horizon Europe, a research scheme aimed at funding projects including the fight against Covid-19, which runs from 2021-2027. Therefore, there is an argument to suggest that populist parties that want a return to a sovereign state and/or an exit from the European project all together, would in fact be missing out on billions to help fight future infectious diseases. This idea was echoed by Niall Dickson, Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation and co-chair of the British Health Alliance when he stated “it is in all our interests to maintain these vital links between the UK and the EU not least because working together we are more likely to trace and tackle serious outbreaks effectively.”

Populist parties fail to understand that cooperation is vital in these circumstances, and too often are defined by the nationalistic greed to only protect their own citizens. This was evident in April, when Donald Trump sought to buy the exclusive rights for a potential vaccine for Covid-19 from a German biotech firm.

Europe’s response to Covid-19 is incredibly important if it is to simultaneously defeat the current populist push. To date, the EU has agreed to raise billions of Euros to help find a vaccine and treatments for the fight against Covid-19 as part of an “international alliance”. EU countries are coming together to work out ways of mitigating the spread and inventing adequate treatments to help strengthen health care systems and restart the economy. While the EU has yet to agree on an economic recovery plan, speculation from Brussels suggests that over €2 trillion will be spent to help ease the biggest recession since the Great Depression.
The worry for Europe is that the current Covid-19 crisis could make or break the Eurozone and help populist parties make more gains in future elections. The Eurozone also has deep historical divides between Northern and Southern states and the economic uncertainty of Covid-19 will undoubtedly lead to further unrest between the core member states in the North and the periphery states in the South. To help mitigate a future clash, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, wants a “Marshall Aid” type economic recovery plan to provide economic and political relief for those countries in the periphery. In a speech she said “To do this, we will need a massive investment in the form of a Marshall Plan for Europe. And at the heart of it should lie a powerful new EU budget”.

Her calls for an economic recovery plan have also been echoed by the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, who claimed “if the virus doesn’t stop at the borders, then financing mechanisms cannot do so either”. The next EU budget will be an integral instrument of solidarity and modernization, similar to that of the Marshall Plan between 1948-1951. While Marshall Aid was successful in helping Western Europe to recover and develop after the Second World War, it is important that any form of state aid is relaxed so that countries such as Spain and Italy – where death rates are the highest in Europe and economic shutdowns have been severe – are able to grow their economies.

**Concluding remarks**

Populist parties are not homogenous entities. They grow in various forms, depending on particular economic, political, cultural and societal issues. However, what unites them is their opposition to globalisation and a return to a sovereign state. These populist parties consolidate their regimes by falsely constructing imagined threats (uncontrollable migration and evil international forces) but then fail by offering inadequate solutions to combat them. In the case of Covid-19, we are seeing populist parties use this
pandemic as an excuse to stop the forces of global co-operation and pursue a nationalist agenda.

Europe must come together and find pragmatic solutions to overcome this new wave of populism. To do this, the EU needs to plan out how it will spend the Covid-19 economic rescue package so that it allows Europe to rebuild on a level scale, and that the benefits of the package are felt throughout the EU-27. It is paramount that the Eurozone is protected and that any economic package includes adequate state aid flexibilities to allow countries in the periphery to sustainably grow their economies. Pandemics destroy societies and they also highlight the weaknesses of them at large. Covid-19 has exposed the fragilities of globalisation, but Europe must be prepared to tackle this issue with solidarity through an adequate economic package that protects the European project from future collapse.