

REVIEW ARTICLE

# Understanding Europe's Populist Right: The State of the Field

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Over the past decade right-wing populism has achieved unprecedented popularity across much of Europe. The first intimations came in 2010 when Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party won a super-majority in alliance with Christian Democrats, gaining the power to reshape Hungary's legal framework. While the eurozone crisis then sparked the rise of left-wing anti-establishment movements across Mediterranean Europe, elsewhere populism exploded on the right. In the 2014 European parliamentary elections centrists lost seats to parties on the margins, and Fidesz extended its grip over Hungary. Over the next three years Law and Justice won elections in Poland with a campaign steeped in religion and euroscepticism; the United Kingdom shocked the world by voting to leave the European Union; Marine Le Pen of the National Front demolished conventional candidates in the first round of the French presidential elections; the anti-immigrant Lega joined a ruling coalition in Italy; and in Germany, Europe's largest country, the nationalist Alternative for Germany (*Alternativ für Deutschland*; AfD) entered parliament as the third largest party.

What was happening? Nearly everywhere one looked, leaders who criticised established parties and the politics of the last thirty years seemed on the cusp of transforming Europe, like a storm wave pummeling a creaky pier. The tumult spawned a cottage industry of scholarship trying to define populism, understand from whence this surge came, and identify the deeper grievances and dynamics at play. After a frenetic burst of studies, heralding everything from a descent into tyranny to the end of the European Union (EU), scholarship on populism has slowed.<sup>1</sup> We can now take stock of what we have learned, to categorise explanations for right-wing populism and see how these diverse interpretations fit together or contradict each other. What follows is a short walk through five influential explanations for the populist right – economic, political, cultural, migrational and European – and a conclusion that the specific course of European integration since 1990 deserves much of the blame; that right-wing European populism has distinctly *European* roots even though it shares connections with similar movements around the world.

A first current of scholarship tried simply to define populism and assess how it differed from the politics that had characterised Western Europe for decades. Jan-Werner Müller, author of a pioneering work on Carl Schmitt's legacy, and Cas Mudde, who has been writing about populism for over a decade, crafted the most widely accepted definitions. Contrary to some who see populism as the product purely of resentment or connected to a particular class, Mudde argues that key attitudes underpinning it are widespread in Europe and emerged already in the 1980s with the National Front in France. For Mudde, populism is less a pathology that deviates from democracy than a 'pathological normalcy' that exaggerates tendencies already prevalent in mainstream Europe. Above all, while politicians often cultivate group sensibilities, populists push this to the extreme by separating society into two stark and antagonist camps, 'the pure people' and the elite, and position themselves as the voice of the former.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017); Andreas Staab, *The End of Europe? The Five Dilemmas of the European Union* (New York: Lexington Books, 2020).

To this Müller adds the important distinction that right-wing populists are anti-pluralist. They pursue exclusionary identity politics by claiming that they *alone* represent the authentic demos: all other groups – elites, minorities, outsiders – are morally corrupt. For Mudde and Müller populists are not just anti-liberal, they are a distortion of democracy, for when taken to the logical extreme their practices cast political opponents as illegitimate and jeopardise the very ability to conduct free and competitive elections.<sup>2</sup>

With a workable albeit contested definition in hand, scholars – mostly political scientists, political theorists and economists – have generated at least five explanations for Europe's recent right-wing surge. In many cases these accounts overlap, and any effort to categorise them blunts their nuance and blurs much that they have in common. Nevertheless, substantial differences have emerged in how scholars understand the rise of leaders like Orbán or Le Pen.

A first strand portrays populism as a backlash against economic globalisation, one that hit Europe particularly hard after 2008. Crafted by economists and economic historians, this narrative argues that slow growth, rising inequality and mounting material insecurity feed resentment with the status quo and with those who manage the economy and expose social fissures between the haves and the have-nots. Economic grievances, put simply, are central to populism both right and left.

Those advancing this economic interpretation begin their story with the intense cleavages of Gilded Age America, during an earlier era of globalisation, where farmers led by William Jennings Bryan, in the context of agricultural and monetary turmoil, formed one of the first populist movement by castigating the East Coast banking elite. They then turn to the 1920s and 1930s, a period that saw the collapse of global economic connections. Where political theorists like Mudde and Müller disagree over whether German National Socialism and Italian Fascism were populist, economic historians largely agree in seeing these decades as a period defined by economic turbulence that generated an unprecedented burst of populism.<sup>3</sup> According to Barry Eichengreen, who built his reputation on a pioneering economic history of the Great Depression, inflation in the 1920s followed by appalling unemployment in the 1930s undermined confidence in mainstream politicians and governments, creating the space for new political movements. Populism, however, only succeeded in countries where political institutions were weak and where 'conventional policy solutions were fundamentally less able to handle' the economic legacies of world war and depression. For Germany, in Eichengreen's rendering, 'there was no way for a reasonable government to extricate [the country] from the reparations tangle and transcend its domestic political consequences'. Only the 'less reasonable' regime of Adolf Hitler – who broke with traditional policy by bringing much of the economy under state control – could purport to overcome the challenge of unemployment. In America, by contrast, which also experienced deep unemployment and grassroots protests, voters switched from one mainstream party to another. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's emergency measures – from the Social Security Act to work relief – were just enough to halt the downward economic spiral and repel the populist challenge. One upshot from this economic story: effective policy can deflect populism by addressing the grievances that give rise to it.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1989, argue Eichengreen and Dani Rodrik, a leading heterodox trade economist at Harvard, globalisation has again created immense economic problems and cleavages – between capital and labour; between skilled and unskilled workers; between mobile professionals and local producers. In the 1990s and early 2000s free trade brought many benefits, but in high-income countries intricate

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy', in Cas Mudde, ed., *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–12, here 3; second quotation from Cas Mudde, 'Europe's Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making', *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec. 2016), 25–30, here 26; Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 1–6.

<sup>3</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33; Müller, *Populism*, 93–6.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Eichengreen, *The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievances and Political Reaction in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 71–9, quotations from 75; Barry Eichengreen, *Golden Fetters: The Gold Standard and the Great Depression, 1919–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

new global supply chains hurt low-wage workers that now had to compete with their counterparts in East Asia. Financial globalisation, meanwhile, led to uncontrollable surges of short-term capital that wreaked havoc first with small and then later even large economies.

In Europe, this economic narrative goes, growth stagnated more than in the United States after the 2008 financial crisis. The eurocrisis then created a perfect storm in which unemployment across the South and parts of Eastern Europe spiked, deepening economic fault lines. Brussels' handling of the eurocrisis bailed out northern banks but at the cost of austerity measures that hurt the rest of society, creating a dichotomy between those who survived and those who suffered from this economic upheaval. In the United Kingdom, after 2010 spending cuts by the conservative government damaged public services and contributed to inequality. In the words of Eichengreen, by 2015 this 'resentment of inequality came to a boil', fuelling the populist drive to leave the EU, which Nigel Farage blamed for Great Britain's economic woes. Low-income households were more than twice as likely to vote for Brexit as high-income ones. In this interpretation populists represent the losers of economic globalisation. For Eichengreen and Rodrik the remedy is more growth and fairer growth, to help those displaced by international competition and global finance.<sup>5</sup>

This explanation may clarify the timing of Europe's populist surge and explain why certain groups – financial elites, or the Troika of the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund – became the target of heated vitriol. Yet the analysis remains coarse. Economics alone cannot explain why some eurozone countries, like Greece, saw left-wing movements emerge while in others, like Italy, right-wing ones did. And it hardly tracks developments in Hungary or Poland, where low-wage workers often benefited from global supply chains as German car manufacturers outsourced production there to exploit the region's inexpensive labour. Since its recovery from shock therapy in the mid-1990s, Poland has been a poster boy of growth.

So, from a second angle, scholars have combined economic with political explanations, asking why those parties that were best suited to tackle inequality failed to do so. Sheri Berman, known for her macro history of social democracy, argues that the transformative decline of this political creed created the space for a populist right to thrive. Forged in the late nineteenth century by Marxist reformers, trade unions and progressives, social democracy aimed to harness capitalism for the working class. After the Second World War its ideals prevailed across Western Europe, and even centre-right parties called for a strong welfare state, powerful unions and constraints on capital. But following the economic malaise of the 1970s this edifice began to unravel, opening the door for neoliberalism, a philosophy of market governance that aimed to solve inflation, public debt and stagnant growth by applying markets to ever more spheres of society. By the 1990s even social democratic leaders embraced elements of neoliberalism. As Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder put it in 1998, iconic state leaders of the left in Britain and Germany, social democracy must stand not only for collectivism but for 'economic dynamism and the unleashing of creativity and innovation'. Many on the left stopped focusing on capitalism altogether and turned to questions of culture and identity. Berman and Maria Snegovaya argue, however, that this shift meant social democrats had difficulty addressing the resentment that emerged with the financial crisis and the eurocrisis. After 2008 left-of-centre parties began haemorrhaging voters, and in 2017–18 they registered some of their worst results since 1945. Right-wing populists, by contrast, grasped this opportunity to occupy the space once held by the left, calling for state intervention and a strong safety net – at least for the 'right' people. Jean-Marie Le Pen, for instance, who had founded the National Front in France, espoused Reaganomics. But after 2011 his daughter and the party's new leader, Marine Le Pen, began calling for strong social protection for working-class French citizens. In Germany the AfD's remarkable success came at the very moment the SPD (Social Democratic Party) reached its nadir.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Quotation from Eichengreen, *Populist Temptation*, 135; Dani Rodrik, 'Populism and the Economics of Globalization', *National Bureau of Economic Research* (Working Paper 23559) (July 2017), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23559>.

<sup>6</sup> Quotation from Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder, 'Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* (Working Documents 2) (June 1998); Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, 'Populism and the Decline of Social

Eastern Europe, Berman and Snegovaya argue, was particularly challenged by the transformation of social democracy. After the fall of communism, social democrats of a different ilk governed much of this region, and during a moment when market fundamentalism had few rivals these parties embraced neoliberalism more than their Western counterparts. Yet shock therapy was traumatic, and in many cases left parties that had imposed markets received the blame when hardship ensued. In Hungary, for example, after 1989 the Communist Party rebranded itself as a social democratic organisation and aligned with liberals to push market reforms. In 1998 they lost votes when real wages declined, only to return to power in 2002. But after 2006 Hungary's high debt led the party to impose even more spending cutbacks and raise energy taxes, leading again to their downfall. By 2010 most blue-collar workers supported Fidesz because Orbán claimed to offer what social democrats failed to deliver: social and income stability.

This narrative of social democratic collapse explains part of the appeal of populists. Nevertheless, right-wing populism is still fractured when it comes to economic matters. Germany's AfD, after all, began as a party of free marketers who hated not just the euro but the welfare state too. The focus on political economy, moreover, says little about the cultural axis on which the populist right has built its appeal. A third explanation thus emerged that contests the importance of the economy by portraying right-wing populism as a cultural backlash. Tracing the ideological disposition of over 200 parties, Harvard political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have grounded this cultural thesis with detailed empirical work. They argue that cultural change in Europe and North America toward cosmopolitan values sparked a reaction among groups holding more traditional values. Cosmopolitan liberalism sees the world evolving into a single community, and embraces open borders, multiculturalism and a diversity of lifestyles. Such ideas began to emerge in the 1970s when a 'silent revolution' toward post-material values began to unfold, a concept made famous by Inglehart himself in 1977. As Europeans saw their material needs for food, clothes or shelter satisfied by the incredible postwar economic miracle, many began seeking the fulfilment of other values like travel, mobility, diversity, sexual freedom or environmental preservation. This slow-moving cultural shift drove the rise of Green parties, progressive movements, and racial and gender equality. But for some groups it triggered a sense of loss, Norris and Inglehart suggest, and 'negative reactions among older traditionalists who felt threatened by the erosion of the values which were once predominant', values revolving around religion, national identity and respect for hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

The silent revolution, put simply, opened a cultural cleavage. Norris and Inglehart argue we should divide society less into the winners or losers of globalisation than into those supporting conservative values and those advancing post-material ones. The former typically included older generations, the less educated, the religious, ethnic majorities and men. Many in these strata distrust the change brought by cosmopolitan liberalism, Norris and Inglehart maintain, and resent the loss of a communal identity that once brought them meaning. Surveys underscore that populist support is generally stronger among these groups. Those voting for Brexit, for instance, tended to be older and less educated. Non-economic issues such as migration, crime, terrorism or the environment, meanwhile, have outpaced economic ones in importance in party manifestos across Europe since the 1990s.

The evidence presented by Norris and Inglehart is strong. Nevertheless, they depict a slow-moving cultural transition over several decades. Why, then, did right-wing populism explode in the 2010s? This is hard to explain by shifting values alone. Here a fourth explanation, related to culture, suggests

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Democracy', *Journal of Democracy* 30, 3 (2018), 5–19; Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); see also Oliver Nachtwey, *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*, translated by David Fernbach and Loren Ballhorn (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); quotation from Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 'Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash', HKS Faculty Research Working Paper RWP16-026 (2016), 14; Ronald Inglehart, 'The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies', *The American Political Science Review* 65, 4 (1971), 991–1017.

an answer to the question of timing: the migration crisis of 2015–16. Where Norris and Ingelhart see xenophobia as only one part of a broader packet of traditionalism, others see it as the defining feature of the populist right: populism as reaction to the mass migration of peoples who look different from white, often Christian Europeans. For the chronicler of Eastern Europe's post-communist society, Slavenka Drakulic, this 'sudden wave of refugees' was 'the decisive event' of Europe's past thirty years. Leaving aside how sudden it actually was – migration from sub-Saharan African had been mounting since 2010 – the refugee crisis opened intense divisions within European nations and within the European Union.<sup>8</sup> Europe's internal frontiers had been opening since the Schengen agreement of the 1980s, such that by the 2000s border controls among participating states had fallen away and residents enjoyed near complete mobility within the European Union, with the exception of Great Britain and Ireland. Once migrants crossed into Europe, they, too, could go almost anywhere.

While the inflow of migrants had hovered in the tens of thousands before 2010, in 2015 this dynamic took on immense weight as the Syrian war and flight from Afghanistan overlapped with a continuing stream of emigrants from North Africa. That year the EU took in 1.3 million people. European nations, though, displayed dramatically different predilections for housing refugees, with a strong divide running between West and East. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel made a unilateral and unplanned decision to accept basically any refugee who arrived. Her famous words, 'We can manage this (*Wir schaffen das*)', fuelled an initial culture that welcomed those fleeing distant lands. Within two years Germany received over a million applications for asylum. The countries of Eastern Europe, by contrast, refused to take more than a nominal figure for a variety of reasons. Immigration there was already a charged issue, following the exodus of young citizens westwards after the ascension of many Eastern European states into the EU. Some in this region criticised the readiness of Western Europeans to accept Syrian or Afghani refugees when they had so recently looked askance at Polish or Hungarian migrants. Many Eastern European countries had less exposure to non-European immigration historically, Douglass Weber argues, at least compared to France, the Netherlands, or Germany. And some already had right-wing populist parties in power, like Hungary, which cast this new wave of migration as a threat to an imagined white, Christian nation.<sup>9</sup>

Brussels, moreover, mismanaged the response, and it proved impossible to reach agreement among member states about where to place refugees – should they stay in the nation where they made first landing, or be passed to other countries? The question elicited intense acrimony, and for Ivan Krastev, Bulgarian political scientist and author of *After Europe*, it was the spark that propelled right-wing populism to the heights of power. For him the tourist and the refugee had become 'symbols of globalization's contrasting faces'. While the former is a protagonist, the latter 'is the symbol of globalization's threatening nature. He comes weighed down by the misery and the trouble of the wider world'. Mass migration, Krastev goes on, is nothing less than the twenty-first century's new revolution; as indigent or persecuted people flee their land for a better life they transform both home and destination. In Europe this provoked a bitter counterrevolution, Krastev claims: 'anxious majorities fear[ing] that foreigners are taking over their countries and jeopardizing their way of life'. Nationalist leaders pounced, exploiting these anxieties for gain. In Hungary, Orbán attacked Brussels and Merkel for bringing in millions of foreigners and starting an upheaval that would 'redraw the ethnic, cultural, and religious map' of his country. In Germany, the influx transformed the AfD from an anti-euro organisation of professionals into an anti-immigrant party that gained incredible momentum at the polls. As one of their leaders retorted in response to Merkel, 'We don't want to manage this.'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Quotation from Slavenka Drakulic, *Café Europa Revisited* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Heaven Crawley et al., *Unravelling Europe's 'Migration Crisis': Journeys Over Land and Sea* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018); Douglass Weber, *European Disintegration: The Politics of Crisis in the European Union* (London: Springer, 2019), 135–76; James Mark et al., 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 282–5.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 15 and 103; AfD quote from Philip Oltermann, 'How Angela Merkel's Great Migrant Gamble Paid Off', *The Guardian*, 30 Aug. 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/angela-merkel-great-migrant-gamble-paid-off> (last visited 5 Dec. 2021).



In a groundbreaking study, *White Skin, Black Fuel*, Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective expand this line by linking the rise of Europe's far right not just to immigration but to climate change denial. Author of a novel, Marxist account of the Industrial Revolution, Malm agrees with Krastev in pinpointing hostility to immigration as the 'one programmatic position' shared by Europe's right-wing populists: the movement's 'ur-problem' through which it channels all other issues. At their core, argues the Zetkin Collective – named for Clara Zetkin, German-Marxist author of a foundational study of fascism from 1923 – such movements want to defend ethnically homogeneous white European nations, which they think are being undermined by immigration from Muslim countries. That is their *raison d'être*, and Malm and his co-authors provide a slew of damning quotations that illustrate just how brutish this ethno-nationalism has become, particularly among Scandinavian and Northern European populist parties.<sup>11</sup>

But the real novelty is that Malm and his colleagues have produced a powerful explanation for why the far right has come to deny climate change so viscerally. This, they show, derives from the fear of immigration and what these parties see as an assault on European values. Some, like Jean Marie Le Pen, before he was suspended from the National Front in 2015, rehash conventional anti-environmental arguments, denouncing global warming as a cloak used by socialists and environmentalists to forge a planned economy on an international or European level that will deprive citizens of their property and freedom. But with the refugee crisis these right-wing movements have generated new claims about climate change. Catastrophic global warming, they argue, is contrived by liberal elites to distract from what these populists think is the *real* crisis: open borders that will lead to a Muslim majority in Europe in a generation, or what Geert Wilders of the Netherlands calls the oncoming 'Muslim Winter'. Going even further, Europe's far right now sees climate science as part of a broader effort to fundamentally question the 'ways of the West' and undermine the sanctity of the white European nation. The climate movement blames Europe for causing global warming, calls on Europeans to lower their living standard to handle the crisis and demands the EU open its borders still further to refugees from climate catastrophes caused by Western emissions. The AfD in Germany, Law and Justice in Poland, the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party in Scandinavia will have none of this. In fact, they argue just the opposite: that global warming is not happening; that if it were, it is not driven by humans; and that in any case more CO<sub>2</sub> is a boon, since warming will benefit Europe's northern climate. As *White Skin, Black Fuel* points out, arguments that meld anti-refugee sentiments with climate change denial have found resonance in certain regions: the strongest support for the AfD and Law and Justice come in the coal districts of Germany and Poland.<sup>12</sup>

The refugee crisis, in sum, has polarised Europe, widened its cultural divisions and opened fault lines by reinforcing a novel axis that economic globalisation had already made apparent. The traditional, class-based left-right distinction began to fade in the face of new lines of conflict mapped out by Krastev and others: between 'globalists and nativists', or those who favour open societies versus those who favour closed ones. But while the migration of a million people may have been large for Europe of the 2010s, it was not without precedent. Since the Second World War, Europe had managed repeated waves of migration without experiencing such political upheaval: between 1945–8; in 1956; and in the 1990s. In 2015, moreover, there were over 20 million refugees worldwide seeking a new country while Europe housed just 5 per cent of these. The vast majority of Syrian and Afghani migrants ended up in Turkey, Jordan and Iran. The refugee crisis, in other words, was a global one: why such a backlash in Europe, which accepted a mere drop in the bucket?<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, to different degrees these explanations overlook what is distinctively *European* about Europe's populist right. For an incredible depoliticisation has accompanied European integration

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso, 2021), quotations from 40–41; Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Malm et al., *White Skin*, 39–43, 60–62, 132, quotation from 51.

<sup>13</sup> Krastev, *After Europe*, 34.

since the 1980s and created the space for new movements that explicitly sought to re-politicise important decisions. By 2010 Europe was increasingly governed by technocrats and experts with little connection to voters on the ground. Peter Mair identified this problem already in 2006 in a prescient article, 'Ruling the Void', a notion that historian Roger Eatwell and political scientist Matthew Goodwin returned to in 2018 to understand the growing distrust in conventional leaders. At the national level, membership in Europe's mass parties has fallen by the hundreds of thousands since 1980. At the same time, these parties were increasingly governed by an elite cadre of highly educated, insulated career officials that looked strikingly similar across party lines, what political scientists have called 'cartel' parties. Citizens, Eatwell and Goodwin argue, consequently lost interest in elections and catch-all parties when there seemed so little difference to choose from.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, the shift to expert rule characterised many democracies after 1990. Advisors everywhere called for state institutions to follow the path of central banks, which had been insulated from the so-called volatile will of the public and which could, in theory, craft rational policy with long-time horizons. Yascha Mounk, a German-American political scientist, makes this argument most provocatively about the entire West, which he argued was seeing 'rights without democracy', where decisions historically subject to political contestation were being concentrated in the hands of a professional elite. In Europe, Italy was the canary in the coal mine, the first Western democracy that experienced the sudden collapse of a traditional two-party system. As Italy's centre-left prepared for the euro in the 1990s it slashed public services, cut the deficit and created the impression that Italians had few alternatives to expert governance if they wanted to be part of Europe. This 'narrowing of political choice' created space for new movements, like Forza Italia led by media titan Silvio Berlusconi and also the Lega, which claimed to offer a new model that would represent political outsiders.<sup>15</sup>

This depoliticisation of politics was most striking at the European level, Jan Zielonka argues, one of Europe's leading political scientists and author of *Counter-Revolution*. The reinvigoration of European integration after 1986 placed more power in the European Commission, an appointed group of bureaucrats that is notoriously insulated and that cultivates its own *esprit de corps*. The single currency led to the European Central Bank, one of the most powerful and least politically accountable monetary institutions in the world. Decisions that dramatically shaped Europe's nation-states were increasingly made by the Council of Europe, where heads of state come together in qualified majority voting. This process, however, gives large countries an excessive say and leaves smaller ones fearing they lack a voice. National laws were gradually superseded by European law and monitored by a court in Luxembourg far removed from the national publics. The only truly democratic institution in the EU, the parliament in Strasbourg, had a discouragingly low voter turnout that declined consistently from 1979 until 2014. More generally, policy making became so interconnected that by the 2000s it was difficult to do anything in Europe without going through a maze of institutions. Policy today is now a complicated three-dimensional tango with a half dozen partners. To use Mair's words, Europe was a democracy without a demos. Or as Zielonka puts it, European politics became an 'art of institutional engineering' where 'citizens were to be educated rather than listened to', with the EU the 'prototype of a non-majoritarian institution led by "enlightened" experts largely independent from electoral pressures'.<sup>16</sup>

To a certain extent, European integration had been a top-down, technocratic project from the beginning. In a sweeping overview of the European project, historian Kiran Klaus Patel highlights this very point: that the European Community was 'born technocratic', and that in its first decades

<sup>14</sup> Peter Mair, 'Ruling the Void', *NLR* 42 (Nov./Dec. 2006); Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 242–3.

<sup>15</sup> David Broder, *First They Took Rome: How the Populist Right Conquered Italy* (New York: Verso, 2020), quotation from 4; Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5–6; Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013); on the Commission see Cris Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2000).

European integration resembled ‘classical cabinet politics’ in which leaders make foreign policy with little input from parliament or public. Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, key architects of the European project, specifically wanted to guide Europe with a technocratic secretariat that would operate in a ‘depoliticised space’ and be insulated from daily politics. As Jan-Werner Müller points out, following the intense political mobilisation, fascist politics and a genocidal world war of the 1930s and early 1940s, this approach to integration was part of a broader effort by European leaders to ‘constrain the popular will’ and avoid returning to more unconstrained politics. Such an order, however, was bound to be vulnerable to political entrepreneurs who spoke in the name of the people as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Why, then, did this depoliticisation of Europe only become a problem in the 2000s and not earlier? Here Zielonka offers little beyond pointing out specific institutions and particularly poor decisions taken by the EU, from a monetary union that lacked a common fiscal policy to the Common Foreign and Security Policy that had no real diplomatic or military power. But others have pointed out how, since the Maastricht Treaty in 1991, the European Union has vastly expanded its ambit into ever growing swaths of everyday life, from the currency people use to the laws they must obey in their own country. And this made all the difference. To use the words of Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, political scientists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in the 1990s and 2000s European integration moved from a ‘permissive consensus’ to a ‘constraining dissensus’. Before 1990, European integration actually played little role in most people’s immediate lives, Patel going so far as to call it an adiaphoron – ‘a matter having no moral merit or demerit’. But with Maastricht, the euro, the push for a European constitution and the opening of Europe’s internal borders this changed, and EU affairs finally entered the ‘contentious world of party competition, elections, and referendums’ on the national level. By 2003 integration was the third most pressing topic in national party competition, above even immigration. Yet the input national publics or elected leaders could give to Brussels remained minimal.<sup>18</sup>

For Poles or Hungarians, this sort of politics was almost all they had known since leaving communism behind. Just four years after 1989 they began following the Copenhagen criteria handed down from Brussels, a set of requirements that shaped domestic policy for countries seeking entry into the EU. Because so much authority shifted to Brussels – from trade policy to border policy – the EU became the prime target of many grievances. Economic globalisation? That was pushed by Brussels. The eurocrisis? Mishandled by the ECB and the Commission. Migration? Mismanaged by Europe as a whole. Cosmopolitan liberalism? What institution better captures this than the Commission itself, an inherently multi-national, multi-lingual, educated and handsomely remunerated group of unelected bureaucrats. It was not just an easy but a natural move for right-wing populists to turn Brussels into a punching bag, to portray the EU as anti-democratic and themselves as the new standard-bearers of a revived, *national* democracy. They would take power back from Brussels – the symbol of a distant technocracy that populists used to craft a dichotomy between a foreign elite and the ‘real’ people. As Zielonka concludes, this was a ‘counter-revolution’ in which the common denominator was ‘the rejection of people and institutions that have governed Europe in the last three decades’. When Orbán tried to rally support for his illiberal democracy, for example, his tagline was ‘Let’s Stop Brussels!’ because the EU would, in his opinion, ‘endanger our national independence’ by making decisions above the heads of Hungarians.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe: A History*, translated by Meredith Dale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018/2020), 131; Müller, *Populism*, 93–6.

<sup>18</sup> Adiaphoron quotations from Patel, *Project Europe*, 138; other quotations and figures from Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, ‘A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus’, *British Journal of Political Science* 39, 1 (2009), 1–23.

<sup>19</sup> Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution*, 2–3; quotations from ‘The “Let’s Stop Brussels!” National Consultation’, *The Orange Files: Notes on Illiberal Democracy in Hungary*, <https://theorangefiles.hu/the-lets-stop-brussels-national-consultation/> (lasted visited 5 Dec. 2021).



The best scholarship captures these specifically European dimensions of right-wing populism, some more explicitly than others: Mudde, Müller, Zielonka, Berman and Snegovaya, Mair, and Krastev. The European Union, these authors agree, has a strong need to look in the mirror, because its development over the past thirty years has been far from perfect. Yes, it has solved many challenges and positioned itself as a positive force in everything from consumer protection to human rights, tolerance and the fight against global warming. All of this should be applauded. But the EU has generated a host of other problems along the way, by creating a rarefied technocratic politics removed from the input of ordinary citizens. Right-wing populism is not a constructive response to these developments. In fact, quite the opposite: leaders like Orbán are damaging to Europe, to democracy, and in many ways to the people they govern. But their rise has exposed problems with European integration as it has unfolded since 1990, shining a light onto how divorced policy making in Brussels can be from voters and how questionable some of its policies may seem to those with other opinions. If Europe is to overcome its right-wing populist surge, the need for democratic reform is as great as ever.