

# THE DANGEROUS THREAT OF POPULISM

**we**

**against them!**

Populism is a dangerous temptation for the mainstream political parties all around the world, but in Europe it could become the cause of a totalitarian tsunami.

Populist propaganda as a shortcut to gain power and mobilise masses was and is a cyclic historical phenomenon putting in danger the very essence of democracy and its related values of individual human rights and tolerance.

Its dangerous nature can be identified by looking back to the 20s, 30s and 40s of the past century - when the great economic depression, starting in 1929, set the stage for fascism and Nazism. The basic mechanism is simple, but effective: uncertainty generates fear and fear brings hatred, when people's emotions and dreads are manipulated.

In the wake of the economical crisis, starting 2008, Europe is threatened to undergo this cyclic phenomenon more than ever since the past great depression.

## HOW TO DEFINE POPULISM

There are many definitions in the political science literature, but the often stressed explanation that populism is the mobilisation of a maximum of votes on short notice by using unrealistic, but popular promises rather characterises opportunism than populism. Populism is an approach based on elemental fears and emotions of people. It is politically utilised through popular stereotypes, clichés and prejudices to establish a certain position in the political field. The basic principal is always the same: **'We against Them'** - the class fight of the 'ordinary people' versus the 'ruling establishment' and/or the 'privileged elite'. Populism builds up on an imagined unity of the people against defamed political and cultural elites, but also against groups that are supposedly protected by these elites.

## POPULIST CAMPAIGNING FOR THE SAKE OF VOTES

Populism is heavily used in political campaigns and 2009, the 'super election year' in the European Union, demonstrated that populism is a extremely widespread tool. Economical crisis and its social consequences, as well as immigration and proposed cultural and religious undermining of society are topics exploited by populists and right wing extremists. They try to detect low emotions, fears, stereotypes and prejudices of the majority population and offer simple solutions for quite complicated problems with the aim to establish a popular platform to boost their political options and ideas.

### **The need for concern and activism is underlined by alarming examples all over Europe:**

- In 2009 a nationwide workers strike in the UK under the motto 'British jobs for British workers' called for protectionism of the British labour market against foreign labour
- During an electoral debate in Spain 2008 the leader of the conservative party, Mariano Rajoy, argued that immigrants endanger the social security of the Spanish workers;
- In 2008 Umberto Bossi, head of the Italian far-right Lega Nord and coalition, warned right after his party's coalition with Silvio Berlusconi won the national elections that he has armed men ready to act in the name of public security;
- In course of the 2005 civil unrest in France Nicolas Sarkozy, interior minister of the time, was heavily criticised for his 'strategy of tension', attempting to make believe that most rioters were foreigners and defining them as 'racaille' (scum), which fuelled the nationwide spread of violent riots for weeks;
- The notorious Kaczynski twins in Poland, both with high-ranking political careers, create regular international agitation with their homophobic rhetoric;

## Timeless attitudes?

Two interesting researches amongst European citizens give a clear indication on what populists and right wing extremist are going to use in order to improve their political options:

- In 2009, the *Anti-defamation League* published the results of a research on anti-semitism in seven European countries. One of the conclusions was shocking: '31% of the Europeans blame Jews for the economic crisis'<sup>1</sup>. This is not only frightening because the same approach caused our continent to suffer the Holocaust, but it also shows that the 'old' anti-semitic attitude was not buried in the past.

In the 'We against Them' tactic, populists are always defining enemies. In this case, those enemies are the Jews. Who, according to anti-semitic believes, personate a sort of 'shadow power' that control the financial system so that at the end of the day 'we can blame them for the economic crisis'.

Most right wing extremists are using such myths to create and sustain the picture of a 'public enemy'. However, it is important to point out that the 'criminalisation' of certain groups and communities as a way to build a political speech - using detected sociological tendencies - is also one of the features of populism.

- The next example gives an idea about what could happen to democracy in the future, if inflammatory speeches and intolerant political tendencies keep on rising. In a way it has to do with the role of the mainstream democratic political parties, which are losing the skills to connect with the people in a responsible way. Following populist tendencies they are jointly responsible for the growth of antidemocratic and intolerant resentments in Europe. It also has to be seen in the context of how right wing extremist groups and parties are practicing demagogic rhetoric to link to people's emotions, by using the language of the 'ordinary man on the street'.

According to a research conducted by the *Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony* in Germany, one out of twenty German teenage boys belongs to a far-right group; and roughly one out of twenty 15-year-old German males is a member of a neo-nazi group, which marks an even higher proportion than the involvement in mainstream politics among the same target group<sup>2</sup>. 'It is shocking that right-wing groups have more success in recruiting male youths than the established political parties', said Christian Pfeiffer, co-author of the report that was mandated by the Ministry of Interior in Germany. Pfeiffer said fewer than 2% of young men were active in mainstream politics, compared to 5% involved in far-right groups. One of the conclusions that we can draw from it, is the importance of practical work to raise awareness against intolerant prejudices and antidemocratic attitudes among young people. This is about to reduce space for populist speeches, making them powerless and push mainstream political parties to sustain an uncorrupted democratic speech based on the human rights tradition.

<sup>1</sup> ADL: Attitudes Toward Jews in Seven European Countries, [www.adl.org/PresRele/ASInt\\_13/5465\\_13.htm](http://www.adl.org/PresRele/ASInt_13/5465_13.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen: Jugendliche in Deutschland als Opfer und Täter von Gewalt, [www.kfn.de/versions/kfn/assets/fb107.pdf](http://www.kfn.de/versions/kfn/assets/fb107.pdf)

### POPULISM'S FEATURES

**Simplified answers** to complex problems that seem reasonable to the majority, but mostly it is not realistic and feasible at all - 'black and white thinking': e.g. *EU drop out and protectionism of the market to oppose the economic downturn; immigration-stop to struggle unemployment; no social services to asylum seekers to secure pensions; higher terms of imprisonment to lower the crime rate...*

**Campaigning on emotional topics** that not necessarily reflect the country's actual underlying problems: e.g. *criminality, integration, taxes, patriotism, immigration, paedophilia, social equality, gas prices, anti-EU attitudes...*

**Utilisation of popular stereotypes, clichés and prejudices** as tool to mobilise masses. In this respect an important tool for mobilisation and polarisation are simple, but catchy slogans and symbols: e.g. *'British jobs for British workers', 'Occident in Christian's Hand', 'Europe votes. Austria decides', 'Power to the People', 'No blood for Oil', 'Delete the elite!', 'Time for a change!', 'Yes, we can', 'Stop Islamisation', 'For Homeland and Freedom', 'Against the EU-traitors', 'Lithuania for Lithuanians', 'Forward Italy!'...*

**Strong patriotism** with the focus on saving the country's 'own identity' that is threatened by e.g. *globalisation, Islamisation, EU, immigration, constructions of Minarets, bi-lingual road signs or schools, different cultures/religions/traditions...*

### Arguments against Xenophobic Populism in Spain

#### The Challenge

Political debates during electoral campaigns are not always clean and uncorrupted. Most of the times, some politicians are using the topic of immigration in a populist way to create a political speech based on popular stereotypes and prejudices of the 'audience'. Summarising their tactic is simple: use immigration and Roma people as an electoral weapon against others. The ones who suffer in this 'game' are always the most vulnerable groups of the society, which are getting criminalised and stigmatised. Their lives become even harder, just because some politicians are using nationalistic-xenophobic arguments to win votes.

#### The Counterstrike

The *Movement against Intolerance* has published a booklet called 'Analysis Notebook' that points out the dangers of populist sentiments, especially those concerning immigration. This publication contains a 'catalog' of the most frequent xenophobic-populist believes, such as: 'you should not allow more than what can fit in your house'; 'the immigrants are the ones invading Spain and the Spaniards need to defend their land'; 'immigrants take the jobs of Spaniards and consequentially the labor market should be protected for Spaniards'. To all this rhetoric the book responds with clear arguments, based on actual facts that contradict the essence of these xenophobic populist beliefs.

Book available in Spanish:

[www.movimientocontralaintolerancia.com/html/cuadernosAnalisis/cuadernos\\_analisis2.asp](http://www.movimientocontralaintolerancia.com/html/cuadernosAnalisis/cuadernos_analisis2.asp)

# 'We against Them' - Two declared public enemies

Populism has plenty of faces and it does not only change in regard to the created enemies, but also in regard to regions and countries. The current 'Latin American Populism', quite well represented by the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, is quite different to the kind of populism exercised in Europe. What populism always has in common is the 'need for enemies', expressed before as 'We against Them'. It is about to reinforce physical and mental barriers, always using existing stereotypes, fears and social situations in order to reach the maximum of effectiveness for their own agenda.

There are many existing populist concepts of 'the enemy' and all of them need to be opposed such as homophobia, xenophobia, afro-phobia, anti-semitism etc. However, there are two major groups that have been in a controversial public discourse already for a long time and seem to be the 'number one enemy' of most populist and right wing extremists throughout Europe: 'Muslims' and 'Roma'

## ISLAMOPHOBIA

The probably most to the point definition of 'Islamophobia' was stated by the British NGO *Runnymede Trust*<sup>1</sup> and says: 'Islamophobia is the dread or hatred of Islam and therefore lead to the dislike of all Muslims, discrimination by excluding them from the economical, social and public life. It includes the perception that Islam has no values in common with other cultures, is inferior to the West and is a violent political ideology rather than a religion'.

Islamophobia has grown tremendously around the world after the so-called 'September 11 attacks', where a series of coordinated suicide attacks upon the United States took place in 2001. Europe had its up to now most traumatic terrorist attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004 and London on July 7, 2005. Since then, populist anti-Islam argumentation sparked in a growing number of mainstream political parties and organisation<sup>2</sup>.

Several anti-mosque manifestations and campaigns of extreme right groups took and are taking place all over Europe with leading examples in Spain, Switzerland, Germany, The Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, United Kingdom etc. The arguments used against the building of mosques and the alleged 'islamisation of society' are not only islamophobic, but also racist.

Although most mainstream political parties did not endorse these highly xenophobic mobilisations, there is a dangerous sociological tendency being encouraged in a very irresponsible way by quite some media and popular parties across Europe. The Netherlands is a clear example in which all of this has been made concrete. Geert Wilders is a member of the Dutch Parliament and the new face to this phenomenon. As former speechwriter of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, Wilders is doing quite controversial campaigns against Islam. One of his statements is for example: 'I don't hate Muslims, I hate Islam.' He is the producer of 'Fitna', a controversial anti-Islamic short film that declares to explore 'Qur'an inspired terrorism, Islamic universalism and Islam in the Netherlands'. In the European Parliament Elections 2009 Geert Wilders and his party won 17% of the votes in the Netherlands and consequentially 4 seats in the European Parliament.

<sup>1</sup> [www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org)

<sup>2</sup> Islamophobia Watch - [www.islamophobia-watch.com](http://www.islamophobia-watch.com)

# WHO



## shall we blame now?

### Regulars' Table Whispers

Election campaigns and rising right-wing populism seem to be related to each other, in the same way the jump of domestic violence during big football matches is connected to each other. Within the frame of the project 'Stammtischgeflüster' (Regulars' Table Whispers) the organisation Social Impact in Austria together with (cartoonist) drawers addressed topics, such as: xenophobic prejudices, hate speech, freedom of religion, right of residence, homophobia, racism and domestic violence in a smart and funny way. Beer coasters with (comic) drawings, smart slogans, facts and background info were spread among bars and restaurant in course of the 2008 General Election in Austria and the European Football Championship 2008. These actions aimed to raise awareness in public about actual conflicts and 'hot-topics' and to give a more reflected point of view on the issues addressed. In this way conflicts and stereotypes are tackled and a more fact-based discourse is provoked. To tackle populist and intolerant phenomena Social Impact went directly to the place where such phenomena root: taverns. By using the beer coaster as medium it is possible to show effective presence at the place of local opinion formation, spreading point of prejudices and origin of populist speeches - the table where the regular guests drink their beer and start discussing about 'god and the world'.

<http://social-impact.at>

## No 'Kölsch' for Nazis

In October 2008 the German right wing populist group 'pro-Köln' planned to do a big scale international 'Congress against Islamisation' in the city of Cologne. This conference was planned as part of a series of events that 'pro-Köln' organised against the building of a big central mosque in Cologne (the building of the mosque is approved by the city authorities and already started) and the alleged islamisation of Europe. Local officials were legally powerless to ban the event, but it was possible to mobilise common civil disobedience on such a gigantic scale that the conference needed to be cancelled. Trade Unions, community groups, left-wing groupings, school pupils, students, ordinary citizens and the mayor of Cologne formed an alliance that was strong enough to block the entire city for the international delegations to this racist event:

- Taxis refused to bring the conference participants to the booked accommodations or the conference venue
- Hotels cancelled the reservations of conference participants
- Bars and Restaurants started a common campaign with the Slogan 'NO KÖLSCH FOR NAZIS' ('Kölsch' is the house-brand beer of Cologne) and refuse to serve conference participants
- Thousand of activists from all over Germany together with Cologne's citizens blocked the streets of the city to show their protest against this "anti-Islam conference"

[www.hingegangen.mobi](http://www.hingegangen.mobi)

## ROMAPHOBIA

Valeriu Nicolae, director of the *European Roma Information Office*<sup>1</sup>, wrote in an article called *Romaphobia Europe's Acceptable Racism*: 'If we are poor it is because we do not want to work, if we are rich is because we steal.'

In this statement he points out the most common stereotypes among Europeans. The worrying public opinion towards Roma was displayed by a survey conducted in Romania in 2001, which pointed out that 99% of the Romanians thought that Roma deserve the least respect among all ethnic minorities in the country. According to this survey the top three descriptions of 'Roma' were 'thieves', 'dirty' and 'lazy'.

The fact is that Roma are scapegoats in Europe<sup>2</sup>. The above-mentioned prejudices still persist deeply in the minds of people and populists and right-wingers, to categorise them as 'public enemy', use the tremendous racist attitudes towards Roma. As a consequence of that we saw tortures of Roma people in a police station in Kosice (Slovakia), arson attacks against Roma families and settlements in Czechia and Italy, violent assaults against Roma in Romania, illegitimate marches against Roma social housing were organised in Czechia by minor extreme right parties just before the EU elections, harassment in some villages in Spain, just to mention some example. Italy however, deserves some more explanation on this matter.

It is not easy to describe in a few words what is happening in Italy to Roma People. What is certain is that it is a shame that connects the present with the darkest memories of the European history: fingerprints of the Roma population, violent attacks upon Roma camps, anti gypsy populist rhetoric in media and mainstream political speeches and indifference of the society, which is sadly reflected by the following newspaper headline: 'Roma girl's death on a beach in Italy, ignored by sunbathers'. This headline is the evidence of the harmful consequences of populism. This is the dramatic reality of indifference, which we could define as a kind of passive intolerance.

<sup>1</sup> www.erionet.org

<sup>2</sup> EveryOne, Group for international cooperation on Human Rights Culture - www.everyonegroup.com

There is only one possible course for NGOs and civil society to stop this dangerous development:

### **ACTION! - This is our common responsibility and our moral obligation**

- Raise awareness against racism and intolerance
- Protect our shared values of democracy and human rights
- Guarantee the dignity of all the human being
- Preserve Europe from its own totalitarian ghost

**Who if not us? • Where if not here? • When if not now?**

## Internet Resources

- **Eurozine** - The new Populism - [www.eurozine.com/comp/focalpoints/populism.html](http://www.eurozine.com/comp/focalpoints/populism.html)
- **Spiritus Temporis** - Everything on Populim - [www.spiritus-temporis.com/populism/](http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/populism/)
- **ECRI** - The use of racist, antisemitic and xenophobic elements in political discourse  
[www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/14-public\\_presentation\\_paris\\_2005/Presentation2005\\_Paris\\_proceedings\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/14-public_presentation_paris_2005/Presentation2005_Paris_proceedings_en.pdf)
- **OSCE** High Commissioner: Keynote speech on National Minorities 'The Rise of Populism and its Implications for National Minorities'  
[www.osce.org/item/35686.html](http://www.osce.org/item/35686.html)
- **UNITED** Thematic Leaflet - 'How to Understand and Confront Hate Speech' - [www.unitedagainstracism.org/pages/thema03.htm](http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/pages/thema03.htm)

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