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2017**Sovereignist Populism - a Reaction to  
the Democratic Deficit of the European Union***By Dr. Janko Bekić*

Populism has been defined by Cas Mudde as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people”. In the past, populist movements and parties in Europe campaigned against national political elites who, as the narrative goes, lost touch with the common people and pursued their own particular agendas in national capitals. Since the advent of the European Union in 1993 (entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty) their focus has moved to an adversary even more disconnected and physically distant from the national electorates – the unelected, bureaucratic and supranational elite in Brussels. Nevertheless, national heads of state or government remain a secondary target, as they are seen either as powerless (due to the transfer of competences to EU

institutions) or in collusion with the Brussels’ “junta”. This new type of populism can be described as sovereignist, because of its advocacy of downgrading the EU back to a confederation of states, or – more radically – of dissolving it altogether.

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The populist objection to the democratic deficit of the EU is not without substance. Major decisions, such as the introduction of harsh austerity measures in Greece, or the attempted imposition of obligatory migrant quotas on Hungary, have been made in the

*Quartier européen* against the explicit wishes of the affected *demos*, made clear in the Greek bailout referendum of July 2015 and the Hungarian migrant quota referendum of October 2016. Therefore, these decisions can be described as legal, according to relevant EU treaties, but not fully legitimate, as they don't enjoy the support of the concerned populations. Even the renowned German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, certainly no admirer of populist parties, acknowledged in *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response* (2012) that the EU "has been sustained and monopolised only by political elites" and that it is showing signs of moving in the direction of "a kind of post-democratic rule". While some argue that the creeping transition towards post-democracy is a deliberate choice by European political elites, others view it as a regrettable but unavoidable side effect of the current status of the EU which is a *sui generis* formation, neither a confederation of states, nor a federal state.

### **Double assault on liberal democracy**

The EU accepts into full membership only those countries which can prove that they are stable liberal democracies. However, the Union itself does not function as a liberal democracy. EU institutions go to great lengths in protecting the civil and political rights of its citizens, as well as preserving the cultural rights of various minorities. These are undoubtedly the characteristics of liberalism. Yet, when it comes to democracy, the EU is showing serious deficiencies. Besides the above mentioned democratic deficit in the decision making process, there is the issue of

the missing electoral legitimacy of top EU officials such as the President of the European Council or the President of the European Commission, or the fact that elections for the European Parliament, the only directly elected body of the Union, have witnessed a steady decrease in voter turnout ever since the first election, held in 1979 (hitting an all-time low in 2014 with a meagre turnout of 42%). In fact, Francis Cheneval and Frank Schimmelfennig convincingly argued that it is not possible for the EU to be a democracy, as it does not have a single *demos*.

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Populists, on the other hand, have no problem with democracy. Moreover, they have a penchant for submitting proposed measures to a direct popular vote, and will support any decision made by the (majority of) people through a referendum. This is why some of them hailed the choice of British voters to leave the EU in June 2016 as the single greatest success of the people against the EU elites. To quote Marine Le Pen: "Something fundamental is happening: the comeback of nations, of sovereign states, with people, with frontiers. People now want to be in charge of their destinies; for a long time they were prevented from doing so ... I do believe that Brexit is the most important event since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Through this vote, Britain has begun to bring down what I have

called ‘the Brussels Wall’, a wall that is closing people within it and that is imposing policies on them that they don’t want”. Rather, populists have a problem with liberalism. In 2014, Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban, one of the few populists actually in power, affirmed that his party Fidesz was constructing “a new state built on illiberal and national foundations” that would, nevertheless, still function as a democracy.

In short, liberal democracy is currently under attack from two sides. Its liberal component is threatened by populists who seek to restore the sovereign nation state as the principal mode of organization of society, albeit with an interpretation of democracy that resembles a tyranny of the majority. Conversely, its democratic component is menaced by liberal elitists who would favour managing the EU without the nuisance of elections and referenda, in a purely top-down manner similar to that of enlightened absolutism.

### **The Russian connection**

A number of sovereignist populist parties performed very well in recent years: the Alternative for Germany (AfD) finished second in local elections in Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 2016, Norbert Hofer from the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) was the runner-up in the Austrian presidential election in the same year, the Danish People’s Party (DF) won the European Parliament election in Denmark in 2014, the Finns Party (PS) came second in the Finnish parliamentary election in 2015, and the National Front (FN) won the European Parliament election in France in 2014. But the most impressive results

were achieved by Viktor Orban’s Fidesz, which won both the Hungarian parliamentary election, as well as the European Parliament election in Hungary in 2014, and, of course, by Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which won the European Parliament election in the UK in 2014 and supported the Leave vote in the UK EU membership referendum in 2016.

The ascendance of onetime political outsiders comes as a surprise for centrist parties and mainstream media. So far, their reactions have included very little in-depth analysis of the sources of widespread disgruntlement with the political establishment, and an abundance of criticism directed at voters who are voting “wrong”. For example, in the days following the UK EU membership referendum there has been a lot of talk about “Bregret” – the alleged phenomenon of Leave voters suddenly regretting their earlier decision and wishing for a do-over. Another tactic is the vilification of political opponents as “islamophobes” (due to their opposition to further immigration from Muslim-majority countries) or Russian pawns (due to their rejection of euroatlantist policies towards the big neighbour in the East).

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Of special concern here, due to profound foreign political implications, is the contention, backed up by mainstream politicians and pundits on both sides of the Atlantic, that right-wing populist parties in the EU are collaborating with Moscow in order to achieve

their mutual goal of dissolving the EU and disrupting the transatlantic ties between Europe and America. The charges are corroborated by the fact that the Front national received a loan of 9 million Euros from Moscow-based First Czech-Russian Bank in 2014 (admittedly, only after the party had been turned down by a number of French banks), or by the fact that Austria's FPÖ signed a cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin's United Russia party in 2016. There is also the matter of most populist party leaders advocating an end to sanctions against Russia, as well as their lenient approach to Moscow's annexation of Crimea, or its hybrid war in eastern Ukraine. In the words of Nigel Farage: "I'm not a fan of Vladimir Putin. But you know, the Ukrainian crisis actually was sparked by the European Union saying they wanted to extend their borders to take in the Ukraine, which Putin took as being a direct threat. Now, my view on Putin and the Russians is, don't poke the Russian bear with a stick. If you do, you're bound to get a response" (note Farage's empathy for Russian geostrategic concerns and his rather nonpopulist disregard for the will of a majority of Ukrainian citizens to join the EU).

By associating with the ultimate anti-establishment political figure in the world (in the sense that Mr. Putin is openly, and quite successfully, defying the rules of conduct in the international arena set up by the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War), the European populists are hoping to annoy the Atlanticist-minded elites even more and attract additional followers from the growing anti-American and anti-globalist electoral pool. Profiting from Putin's politically incorrect charisma, they expect to eventually assume

power in several EU member states and embark on the mission of downgrading the Union to a Staatenbund, or, perhaps, disband it completely. Even though sovereignist populists are outspoken eurosceptics, who enjoy taunting the Brussels' bureaucrats with the prospect of a Frexit or Nexit, they are certainly aware of the fact that while their Russian role model is extolling the virtues of the sovereign nation state, he is at the same time constructing the Eurasian Economic Union – an association of hitherto five post-Soviet countries – whose institutional set-up resembles that of the EU (or its predecessors) to the point of plagiarism.

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## **Conclusion**

Sovereignist populism originally developed in Western Europe in the 1990's, out of earlier forms of right-wing populism. It can be understood as a reaction to the deepening political integration of the EU and the steady transfer of power from national capitals to supranational and intergovernmental institutions headquartered in Brussels. It continues to draw electoral support from its well-known Manichean distinction between

“the good people” and “the bad elite”, however, it has adopted some new elements as well: it increasingly espouses the sovereign nation state as the last bulwark against globalization and the (perceived) accompanying evils of job flight, mass immigration and loss of identity; it particularly agitates against the influx of Muslim migrants because of their poor record of integrating in the European host societies (partly due to the harmful multiculturalist policies of Western European governments which have, for too long, condoned the creation of parallel societies); and it also shows a heightened interest for international politics, by championing a multipolar world order with no superpowers.

The populist message of popular democracy, state sovereignty, economic patriotism, cultural monism and multipolarity in international relations falls on fertile ground as more and more Europeans come to fear disenfranchisement, financial insecurity and

identity loss, and are increasingly irritated by American supremacy in world affairs. The populist narrative is still largely criticized or ridiculed by the mainstream media, however, it has found ample support among Internet-based alternative media outlets, and is well represented on social networking sites. In the ambience of Brexit, Donald Trump’s victory in US presidential elections and Russia’s definite return to great power status, it is unlikely that the appeal of sovereignist populism in the EU is going away any time soon. It’s more probable that we will witness a steady growth of support for populist parties across the Union. This does not necessarily lead up to an imminent disintegration of the EU, but it could set in motion a process of reevaluation of the European project.

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