

## EVENT SUMMARY

# Does “Populism” Pose the Wrong Answers to the Right Questions?

By Gavan Titley and Andrej Nosko

Populism is a contested label in Europe. It signals a profound threat to representative democracy for some, and an antidemocratic fear of the mob for others.

Groups that have been [labeled as populist](#) in Europe include Jobbik in Hungary, the Danish People’s Party, Geert Wilders and the Partij Voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands, and Casa Pound in Italy.

What, then, is populism?

A group of policy researchers, activists, journalists, academics, and politicians discussed this at a February gathering in Budapest. According to Paul Taggart, head of the politics department at the University of Sussex, a long-term decline in trust in politics has combined with a severe economic crisis to fuel a populist moment. This can be overstated, however, through media exaggeration of the importance of small movements.

Populism is more than just a consequence of political and economic crisis, and it involves more than appeals to the people. For Taggart, populism proposes an antagonism to the forms and practices of representative politics that is not revolutionary, but reluctantly political.

This reluctance marks its difference from the supposedly elite, technocratic, and corrupt status quo. The populist supporter is motivated to act because the political establishment is letting down ordinary people. This supports an us-versus-them mentality.

Populism in Europe relies heavily on xenophobia, nationalism, and racism. While most populist parties agitate for “rule changes” rather than “game changes,” the degree to which certain parties and movements exhibit fascist potential remains a contentious question.

Democratic demands need to be reclaimed from xenophobic populists, argued Jordi Vaquer, director of the Open Society Initiative for Europe. Populist politicians may share concerns with more progressive political entities, but usually sharply diverge in their apportioning of

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blame and suggested solutions.

Populism explained Ondřej Liška, former Czech minister for education and current chair of the country's Green Party, can be seen as a consequence of a frustrated desire for political meaning. In the absence of compelling, collective social projects, it provides a horizon of certainty and solidarity. It is further strengthened by excessive corporate power, markets over people, a dearth of alternative proposals and solutions disguised by the mantra that “there is no alternative.”

This absence of collective solidarity is inflamed in the context of austerity. Here, class plays a role. As Joy Warmington from UK charity brap pointed out, the simple fact that the cuts demanded by political leaders will never impact them or their class is painfully clear to the residents of low-income communities.

Austerity, as Mark Blyth argues in his new book, *Austerity, the History of a Dangerous Idea*, camouflages the transfer of a banking crisis to the sovereign debt crisis, and “will produce an even more polarized and politicized society in which the conditions for a sustainable politics of dealing with more debt and less growth are undermined. Populism, nationalism, and calls for the return of ‘God and gold’ in equal doses are what unequal austerity generates, and no one, not even those at the top, benefits.”

Where do think tanks sit in this situation? Not too comfortably, according to Rene Cuperus, director for international relations at the Wiardi Beckman Foundation, as populism rejects technocratic expertise and the willed detachment of sociopolitical elites.

Populism, Cuperus argues, revolts against:

- the positive narrative of globalization;
- expert-driven and seemingly unaccountable decisions;
- the “neoliberal betrayal” of socialist and social democratic parties;
- the powerlessness and complicity of a political class that displays neither the capacity nor desire to restore or even negotiate democratic control over financial capitalism.

It also rejects what Zygmunt Bauman terms “liquid life”: worlds of work and social interaction that appear to be marked by rapid change and precariousness, and devoid of the moral and cultural constraints provided by the grand narratives of Christianity and socialism.

Nevertheless, as Peter Kellner, president of YouGov, UK, pointed out, even in a crisis of representation there is optimism to be found in the resilience of democratic institutions. Think tanks can seek legitimacy by countering the exaggerated claims and promises of right-wing populists, and by providing the kind of informed realism that, as Peter Učeň, senior program officer at the International Republican Institute, noted, will at least prevent people from being “continually disappointed.”

More ambitiously, as Catherine Fieschi, director of Counterpoint, asked, if there is a growing disbelief in technocratic expertise, then what would be a new basis for

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governing, and on what kinds of claims can legitimate governing be based?

In 2014, European citizens vote in the most important European parliament elections to date. The place of populism and populist candidates in these elections will be keenly observed as some pundits predict mainstream political parties may be punished by voters who chose instead to elect populist, far right, anti-EU parties. In short, by next year, Europeans will have their say on who in Europe has the right and wrong answers.