

## Attending to the wrong issue in the political spectrum: Right-wing populism for left-wing concerns in the EU

Lora Hadzhidimova and Aaron Stacey<sup>2</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.40.1>

*Lora Hadzhidimova is a PhD candidate in International Studies with a focus on Security Studies at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. She earned her MA degree in Humanities at ODU and holds an LL.M. degree from Sofia University, Bulgaria. Previously, she completed internships with the Operational Analysis branch in NATO-ACT and the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk, VA. E-mail: [lhadzbid@odu.edu](mailto:lhadzbid@odu.edu).*

*Aaron Stacey has a BA in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics from the University of Stirling in the UK, and an MA in Political Economy of Russia and Eastern Europe from University College London. He is currently a Doctoral Candidate in the Graduate Program in International Studies at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, where he concentrated in Transnational, Interdependence and Power, and International Political Economy. In addition to European academic interests, he has also worked at the Institute for Asian Studies, and the Confucius Institute. E-mail: [astac005@odu.edu](mailto:astac005@odu.edu).*

### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the relationship between populism and the national concerns expressed by citizens in the European Union (EU). In particular, we seek to determine if a certain type of populism in the countries (right or left) responds to the leading national concerns (cleavages). In order to do so, we examine the national concerns and the type of populism in the EU's Eastern and Western member-states, separately, and then compare them. Results show, first, that right-wing populism in the EU is much more common than left-wing populism, and, second, that the East and the West share to a large extent similar national concerns that are left-wing in nature. We conclude that the predominant type of populism in the EU does not overlap with the type of concerns on a national level. Implications for this tendency are provided.*

### Keywords

European Union; Left-Wing; National Concerns; Populism; Right-Wing

---

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and for their valuable recommendations that contributed to making this paper a scholarly contribution of higher quality.

## Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a rise in the support for parties that have come to be termed ‘populist’ or ‘anti-establishment’. The parties come from both left and right, can present different degrees of authoritarianism, of nationalism, and geographically span through the European continent. Based on these parties’ diversity, has arisen the question of the type of populist party that countries have. In some countries, the populist party has a left-wing hue while in other it leans to the right. Some theories suggest that the leftness or rightness of a populist party depends on what social cleavages and concerns are most salient in that society. When an economic cleavage is most salient, such as the gap between rich and poor, income inequality, job prospects and so forth, populists tend to lean to the left. In the case of a salient cultural cleavage, in terms of immigration, language, religion, and others, populist parties will tack to the right. In some places both cleavages may coexist, populists consequently having elements of both (Rodrik, 2017). In this case, the variety of populist parties across Europe as a whole may be explained by the concerns that are most pressing to the people of each country. Using responses from Eurobarometer surveys from the past 10 years, that ask people in each EU-member state what the most pressing concern facing their country is, this paper seeks to test the hypothesis that economic cleavages lead to left-wing populism and cultural cleavages to right-wing populism. If it is true, then we might expect to see that countries, where people have economic concerns would tend to have a populist party that leaned to the left while in countries where people reported cultural concerns the local populist party leaned to the right. We will also pay attention to variations over and across different regions of Europe such as in the East and the West.

## Literature Review

One of the striking features in the literature on populism is the difficulty that authors have had to define the concept as it has been used to describe a variety of movements, parties, and policies, across a variety of geographical locations and time periods, beginning with the Narodniks of Russia in the 1870s and the Farmers’ movement in the United States of the same period. One of the earliest attempts to analyze and define the concept of populism was the 1969 book *Populism* (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969) which derived from a conference held in London. It discussed the phenomena from a variety of angles and across a number of geographical areas but did not reach an all-encompassing definition beyond the underlying criteria that populism lionized “the people” (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969).

The lack of consistent ideological content lead populism to be described as a “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004). The key feature of the ‘people versus the elite’ core idea is that the people are pure

whereas the elite are corrupt, or even that the people are superior to the elite (Mudde, 2004). Beyond that, populism does not present a set of ideas and policies of its own, offering a narrative about how society should be run. On its own, the people versus the elite dynamic can be meshed with either left-wing or right-wing ideologies (Taggart, 2000; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). A study of the voting patterns of left-wing and right-wing populist parties in the Dutch Parliament showed that they had little in common in terms of their voting positions, except their opposition to supranational institutions (Otjes and Louwerse, 2013).

From this perspective, there are no “pure” forms of populism and its study takes the form of case studies, mixing the concept in with specific contexts of time and place (Taggart, 2000). Culture and context are important in understanding populist movements as they reach across geographical location, historic period, and political ideology (Kaltwasser, 2014).

In Western Europe, resurgent populism has sought to exclude others, especially immigrants, through welfare chauvinism, while in Latin America the populist movements have sought to include previously marginalized groups in the political life (Madrid, 2008; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; Koster et al., 2013). However, it should not be said that all European populist movements are based on exclusion, a counter case being the Greek leftist party Syriza (Stavrakakis and Katsembakis, 2014). These differences in the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of populism are also part of the debate about whether populism is good or bad for democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012; Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). Those who look at populism in its European context, such as Mudde, Kaltwasser (2012), and Bartolini (2011), view it as a negative development for democracy. This negativity stems from its main European manifestation in the form of rather xenophobic radical right-wing parties; some of the language surrounding the discussion about this strain of populism brings up imagery of disease and pathology (Bartolini, 2011; Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013).

Populism, analyzed as policy, is faced with the problem of the large array of the types of policies implemented by populists. At the same time, not all political groups that implement a particular policy are necessarily populists: on the one hand, Latin American populists pursued policies of economic redistribution and nationalization of natural resources (Madrid, 2008); on the other hand, although the Tea Party has been characterized as populist, it advocates for radical free market policies (Lowndes, 2012) and is strongly opposed to redistributive policies and nationalization. Hawkins et al. (2012) describe the rightist and pro-capitalist orientation of populism as typical across most wealthy countries. Fuest (2017) considers more broadly that populist economic policies are designed for people who feel “left behind” by globalization, international trade, and feel pressure from immigrants in the labor market and that the policies pursued by populists are short-

termist and careless of budget constraints. Other studies also noted this short-term characteristic (Guiso et al., 2017).

Simultaneously, existing economic difficulties are blamed on foreigners and international institutions that engage in or support unfair competition, harming the domestic population but benefiting the elite. Immigrants are presented as stealing jobs, enabling employers to hold down wages, and “bleeding” the welfare system dry. An elevated sensitivity to immigration as a political issue is also found to be a factor in generating support for populism by Bale (2013), alongside the party leader’s style, and whether or not a party is in opposition or in power. Hostility to immigration can fit into the broader category of “Heritage Populism” as described by Reynié (2016) in his study of the French Front National. Heritage populism centers itself around the protection of heritage in both tangible and intangible forms. Tangible heritage refers to living standards and intangible heritage to ‘way of life’. Both of these can be claimed by populists to be threatened by immigrants as well as by global economic changes (Reynié, 2016).

The populist economic policies’ short-termism is put into practice through expansionary economic policies, running deficits yielding quickly visible short-term benefits but can build up debts and other longer-term problems in the financial system. Economic openness can also be reduced, including the freedom of trade and increased regulation, as well as erosion of some laws (Rode and Revuelta, 2015). Immigration can be made harder and welfare chauvinist social policies make access to welfare payments more difficult for foreigners. Longer-term problems can be large enough to end up canceling out the short-term gains, sometimes to the extent that the overall economic interests of the intended beneficiaries are harmed (Acemoglu et al. 2013).

Fuest (2017) also echoes a point made elsewhere by Taggart (2000) that populists usually offer simplistic interpretations and solutions to complex problems. According to Madrid (2008), populist proponents of these types of policies in Latin America have used them as a way to signal to the electorate that they have not been captured by powerful elite economic interests. Rodrik (2017) distinguishes between populist orientations responding to cultural cleavages and those responding to economic cleavages. This is similar to Inglehart and Norris’ (2016) observation that the traditional left-right cleavage also has a cross-cutting cultural cleavage along the populist-cosmopolitan liberalist lines.

The populist movement’s policy emphasis and its leftness or rightness depend on which cleavage is the focus. In case of a cultural cleavage, populism emphasizes the identity of the people against outsiders who could jeopardize it. The type of identity may combine some or all of national, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities. It has been pointed out that in the U.S., the target of this cultural cleavage has been Mexicans, Chinese, and Muslims; in Europe, the targeted outsiders have

been Muslims, the EU, and other minorities such as Gypsies or Jews. In this case, populism takes a right-wing form and is epitomized in the U.S. by Trump, and in Europe by radical right parties such as the French Front National.

In the case of an economic cleavage, the emphasis tends to be on the gap between the haves and have-nots. Populists calling attention to this cleavage tend to be leftist, and include Bernie Sanders in the U.S., and parties such as Syriza in Europe. These two cleavages can overlap, and both are subject to the “supply and demand” rule with certain problems generating a demand and populist parties stepping in to supply a narrative. Mukand and Rodrik (2017) divide society into three groups: elite, majority, and minority. Depending on the cleavage, a different group will be cast as the problem. In the case of a cultural cleavage, the minority is portrayed as the ‘other’ on the base of identity. With an economic cleavage, the elite is singled out based on their wealth. Populists mobilize supporters based on these divisions, with the former being right-wing and the latter left-wing (Mukand and Rodrik, 2017).

Guiso et al. (2017) expand this idea of demand and supply, i.e. where there is an interaction between a ‘demand’ stemming from economic and distributional problems, creating an inchoate sense of dissatisfaction, and anxiety. Populists ‘supply’ a narrative that helps make sense of these problems and explains who is to blame (also in Rodrik, 2017) by saying that demand/supply for short-term protection is at the conjunction of the two. When faced with an economic cleavage this can take for instance the form of import restrictions; when responding to cultural cleavages short-term protection may take the form of immigration bans or border walls. Since the cultural and economic cleavages can overlap, some populist parties may combine the two, such as Ataka (Attack) in Bulgaria, which has a nationalist and anti-Muslim message combined with policies to improve welfare spending. Other populist parties that combine a xenophobic message with criticisms of the global capitalism’s dynamics include Jobbik in Hungary and Golden Dawn in Greece (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

Either way, the response generally involves some radical institutional change or the removal of some institutional restraints that have unclear long-term effects. Populists try to obscure these effects or only talk about them vaguely. Detailed scrutiny of long-term effects coming from experts or various prominent institutions can be rebuffed as coming from the elites who caused the problem in the first place (Guiso et al. 2017).

Other lenses through which to consider something populist include seeing it as a type of discourse and as a type of political strategy and organization (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). As a discourse, populism does not refer to its policy content alone but to a narrative that tends to be dualistic and moralistic; it juxtaposes a virtuous ‘people’ against a corrupt elite. The us-vs-them

dynamic is an “empty signifier” that is filled in according to a given context (Laclau, 2005). As a political strategy and organization, populism is described as being centralized around a charismatic leader who is able to interpret and channel the will of the people. (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013).

Additional factors discussed as causes of support for populism include demographic and psychological characteristics of certain voters, who are considered to typically be of lower socioeconomic status, lower formal education, male, and of the majority ethnicity, while on psychological measures such supporters score low on Agreeableness and have a tendency towards conspiracy theorizing (Bakker et al., 2015; Taggart, 2000). However, in a more recent article, Rooduijn suggests that there is no ‘typical’ supporter of populist parties across Western Europe, with characteristics varying from country to country (Rooduijn, 2017).

Support for populists may also signal the health or lack thereof in a democracy whereas an increase in populism suggests that the regular democratic functioning is not as good as it could be (Taggart, 2000) and acts similarly to a “drunken dinner guest” that brings up important issues that “polite society” would rather ignore (Arditi, 2007). Support for populism arises from the gap between the ideal of democracy representing the will of the people and the practical reality of institutions that are run by professional and political elites (Meny and Surel, 2000), as well as the sometimes opaque functioning of these institutions (Canovan, 2002). Populists prioritize the implementation of the will of the people to the detriment of checks and balances (Urbainati, 1998).

## Methods

The research question that we aim to explore in the present study is the relationship between populism and the national concerns expressed by EU-voters. More precisely, we seek to uncover if a certain type of populism (right or left) actually responds to a particular national concern (cleavage) that belongs to the realm of the left- or the right-wing populist agenda. We explore national concerns in two time-frames: in a ten-year time frame (2008-2017); and in the most recent time frame for which information was available (2013-2017) so that we can observe how concerns evolve in time and if the countries’ type of populism reflects these concerns as they change. Two reasons presided to our choice to dividing the time-periods this way. First, we want to delineate the most predominant concerns in the EU for the entire period for which data was available whilst capturing the immigration crisis. Second, we aim to examine if, in the shorter 5-year period characterized by high tension engendered by immigration issues, these tensions will assign immigration a leading place among other concerns.

As a secondary inquiry, we endeavor to trace the extent of the overlapping of the kind populism in the European Union in its Eastern with the one predominant in the West, as divided into the following categories: right-wing, left-wing populism or both. We also seek to discover if the

concerns on a national level are the same in the East and in the West. The countries included in the category for Eastern Europe are: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The ones in the group of Western Europe are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. We expect to observe, as Hawkins et al. (2012) note, that the far-right populism will be predominant in the more affluent Western countries, and left-wing in Eastern Europe, due to the economic cleavage existing inside these populations.

The present study uses data from the Standard Barometer conducted by the European Commission in the years from 2008 to 2017 in order to determine what the biggest concerns for the population of a certain EU-member state on a national level are. Since the Standard Barometer is a survey conducted twice a year, the results reveal slight differences. For the purposes of our research, from the two annual Barometers, we chose the national concern that is the most shared among the respondents. The answers of the surveyed sample fall into the following categories: security, economy, rising prices/inflation, taxation, unemployment, terrorism, defense/foreign affairs, housing, immigration, healthcare system, education system, pensions, environmental concerns, energy-related concerns, government debt, climate change. These groups correspond to different types of populism that will be discussed further in the context of the findings. The units of analysis are the 28 member-states of the EU (including the U.K). Despite the fact that Croatia has become a member only in 2013, it is part of the dataset as its development was not only monitored closely for reasons related to its potential membership but was also part of the official data gathering for the Eurobarometer.

The information about the type of populism present in a certain country is determined on the basis of the literature regarding this question, which is included in the Appendix. Concerns such as the economy, rising prices/inflation, unemployment, pensions and the healthcare system allude to a left-wing populist agenda, while security, terrorism, defense/foreign affairs, energy-related concerns and climate change refer to right-wing populism. That said, it is true also that many categories from the left-wing populist agenda could be an element in the right-wing one. For instance, economic concerns, if attributed to immigrants who are accused of “stealing” jobs from nationals would place this category in the right-wing political program. In case there is more than one nationalist party in some member-states we chose the one that had the highest score in the last national and European elections.

## Results and Findings

The first set of findings includes an overview of the populist types in the entire European Union, then in the Eastern part, and in the Western, respectively. By doing so, we aim to make the first step toward a comparison between the type of populism in the EU and the concerns that the citizens express, by country, and to respond to the question if they match or there are some deviations from what we expect to observe. In addition, the results and the findings in this study do not aim to provide support for the fact that only one single factor causes one or another type of populism but only to show some tendencies in how different types of populism reflect on popular concerns. As shown in Table 1, right-wing populism is not only prevalent in Western Europe, as the literature on the question suggests but is also predominant in Eastern Europe, contrary to our expectations. In a small number of cases, there are some amalgamations between left- and right-wing populism. Nonetheless, even if they are added to the percent of left-wing populism, the right-wing type still overwhelmingly outweighs the percentage of the left-wing populism. Interestingly, the right-wing populism's level in Eastern Europe is just as high as in Western Europe. In this regard, it could be concluded that the EU is very homogenous in terms of the predominant type of populism regardless of outlined cultural, economic, historical, and societal differences.

Table 1. Percentage of populism in the European Union by type (2008-2017).

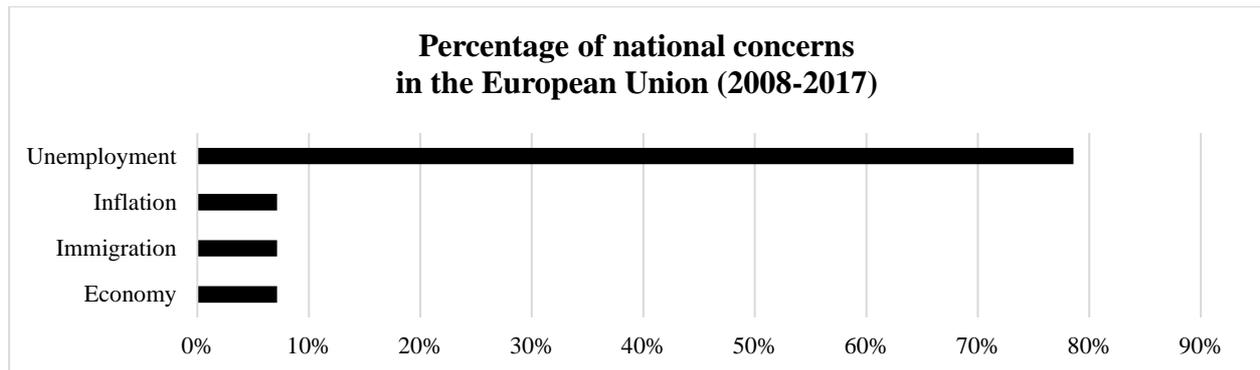
Type of populism	In the European Union	In Eastern Europe	In Western Europe
Right-wing populism	75%	71.43%	78.57%
Left-wing populism	14.29%	14.29%	14.29%
Both types	10.72%	14.29%	7.14%

Source: Authors.

The results from the second part of the study emphasize the biggest national concerns, as expressed by citizens of EU member-states. Figure 1 shows them for two periods: a ten-year one, and the most recent five-year period in an effort to capture how concerns have evolved on EU-level. For the first time-frame, unemployment leads, followed by inflation, immigration, and concerns about the economy. Unemployment has a notable advance in front of the other three major concerns with more than 75% of the EU-citizens stressing this as a main concern, followed by the other three with less than 10%. Even if the second most predominant concern is taken into consideration, it could be asserted that typical elements of the left-wing agenda are still among the most pressing concerns that the Europeans have – a fact that could reasonably provide a suitable environment for left-wing populism across the Union.



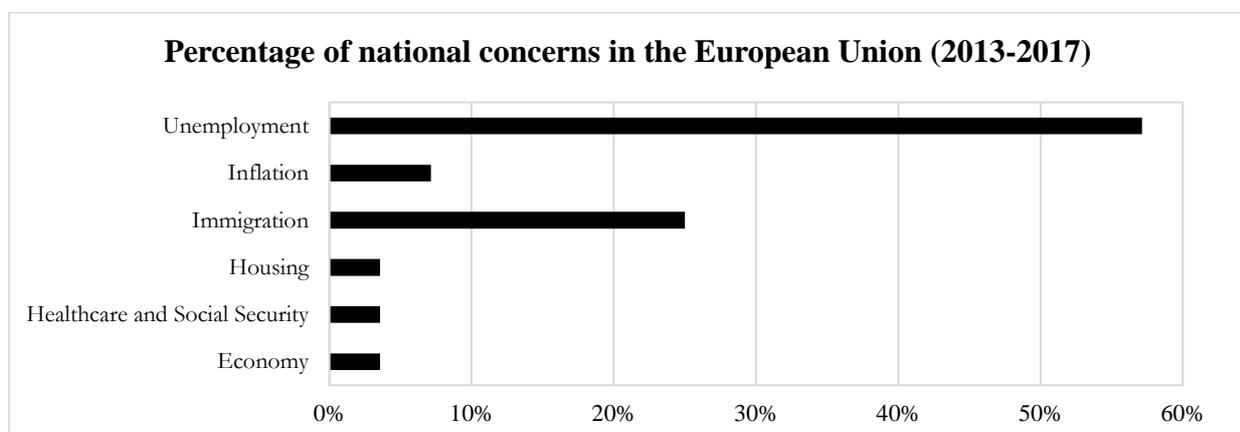
Figure 1. Percentage of national concerns in the European Union (2008-2017).



Source: Authors.

The second part of this stage of our study focuses on the results from the more recent and shorter 5-year period. While the findings in Figure 2 overlap with those from Figure 1 in terms of the leading concern, there are some very important differences and changes that have taken place in the EU. First, the view of unemployment as a major concern has decreased among the EU-citizens. With much less support than the unemployment but still with a sensible increase is the immigration as a concern from the right-wing domain. In the 2013-2017 period, concerns like housing, healthcare and social security and economy also appear, all of them belonging to the left-wing populist agenda. These dynamics captured in these two snapshots underline two factors. One of them has to do with the confirmation of left-wing concerns even when we focus on a shorter period of time, thus, it should logically lead to a more heightened presence of left-wing populist parties. The second finding relates to the increased importance of immigration as a concern on a multinational level and its potential to be used in narratives that could affect discussions about other non-right-wing issues (such as housing, the economy, and the healthcare and social security system).

Figure 2. Percentage of national concerns in the European Union (2013-2017).



Source: Authors.

Table 2 shows what particular countries shifted from left-wing concerns to right-wing concerns, by comparing the 10-year period to the 5-year one. Four Western states – Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the U.K. - transitioned from predominantly left-wing concerns (inflation and unemployment) to immigration as the most shared concern. As opposed to this, only one Eastern European country, the Czech Republic, shifted toward the immigration (right-wing) concern. In the case of three of the four western European states, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden, the shift of main concern to immigration may have been caused by the country's respective experience of the 2015 migration crisis. Austria and Denmark found themselves part of the overland transit route into neighboring countries that had initially adopted an open stance towards refugees and migrants. As a result, they experienced a sudden increase of transiting refugees and asylum seekers. Sweden took something over 134,000 refugees and migrants during the crisis equivalent to 1.6% of Sweden's population, and a total that exceeded the number of births in the country that year (The Swedish Institute, 2018a). The few years before the crisis had also seen historically high rates of immigration to Sweden too (The Swedish Institute, 2018b). In all three of these countries in the preceding 5-year period, there was a significant increase in the number of people from abroad. In the U.K., comparatively, few people were taken in during the migration crisis, although the crisis added further rhetorical fuel to the already burning debate over immigration that had its origins in issues such as freedom of movement (BBC, 2016). Also from around 2012-2013 period, the unemployment in the U.K. had begun to decline (Office for National Statistics 2018). In Sweden too, unemployment began to ease a little after 2010 (Statistics Sweden, 2005), while in Denmark it began to fall around 2012-2013 (Statistics Denmark, 2018). The Czech Republic took few refugees in during the crisis, and overall its immigrant population accounted for 6% of its population, the 24<sup>th</sup> highest rate in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018). However, efforts by the EU to redistribute the refugee population among member states has stoked resistance in the Czech Republic to being forced to take in refugees that it does not want (Frum, 2017).

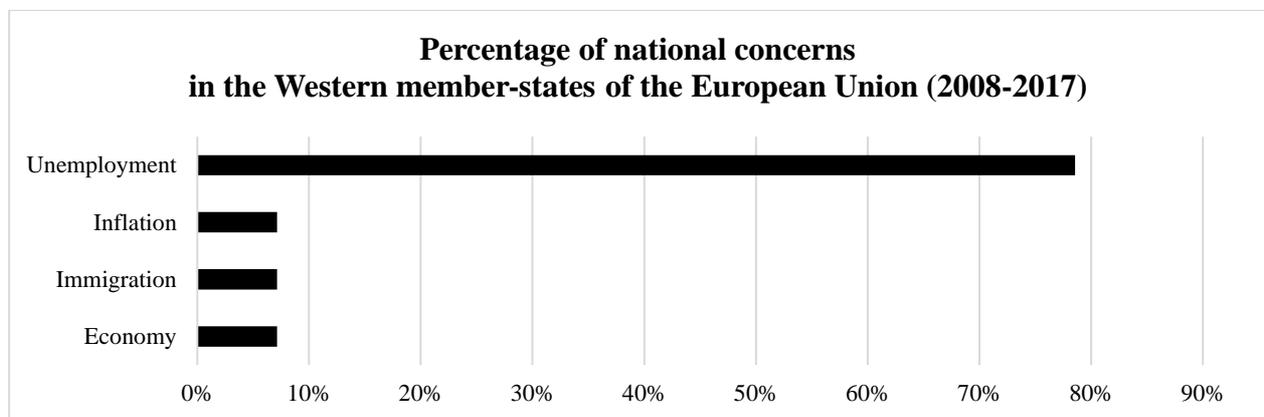
Table 2. Difference between the most frequent concern in a ten-year period (2008-2017) and the last five years of this period (2013-2017) in terms of the transition from left-wing to right-wing populism.

<b>Country:</b>	<b>Transition in the type of concern:</b>
Austria	Inflation (2008-2017) => Immigration (2013-2017)
Denmark	Unemployment (2008-2017) => Immigration (2013-2017)
Sweden	Unemployment (2008-2017) => Immigration (2013-2017)
United Kingdom	Unemployment (2008-2017) => Immigration (2013-2017)
Czech Republic	Unemployment (2008-2017) => Immigration (2013-2017)

Source: Authors.

The second research question that we attempt to address is related to the differences between the national concerns in Eastern and Western Europe. In order to compare them properly, we divided them into two periods as we did with the results from the entire EU. Findings from our study in Western Europe do not provide support for what the literature suggests we would observe – right-wing concerns that will provide a suitable political climate for right-wing populism. While this type of populism is indeed the predominant type, empirical results do not show that the biggest concerns on a national level are the right-wing concerns. Unemployment, as belonging into the left-wing domain is overrepresented (more than 75%) in Western Europe, followed by inflation, immigration, and concerns about the economy, all with less than 10%, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Percentage of national concerns in the Western member-states of the European Union (2008-2017).

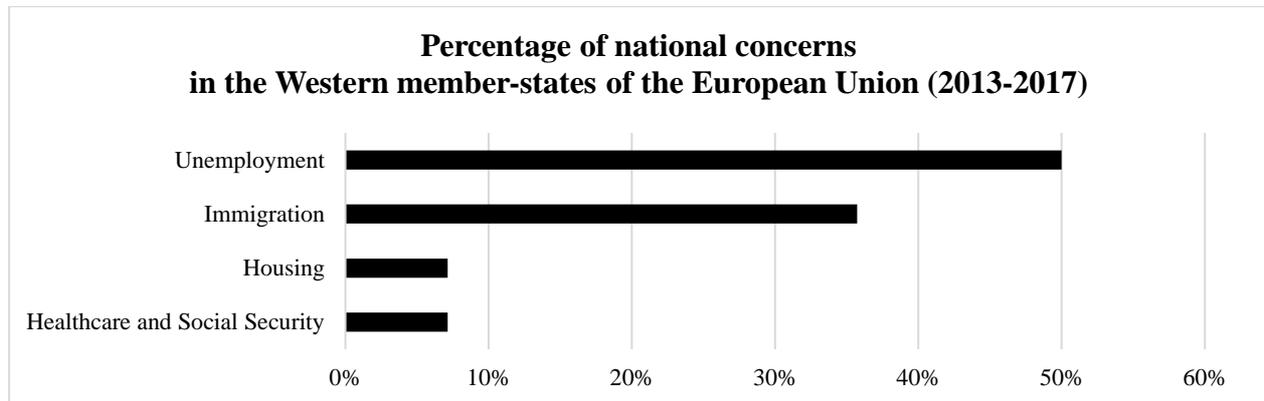


Source: Authors.

As opposed to the 10-year period, the 2013-2017 one shows notable discrepancies regarding immigration. Unemployment remains still the most prevalent concern, represented by 50%, but immigration had advanced to 36% which is a significant increase from the 10-year time-frame. One other change is also observable in Figure 4 – the housing, and the healthcare and social security concerns, customary for the left-wing domain.

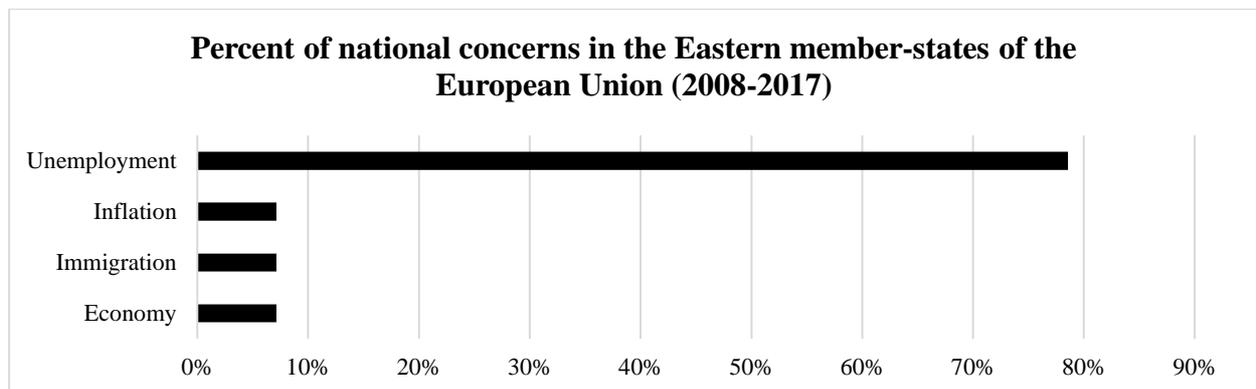
Interestingly, the picture of the 10-year period for the Eastern European concerns, captured in Figure 5, does not look much different from the one for Western Europe considering the same time-frame. Unemployment leads as the most shared concern with 79%, followed by inflation, immigration and economy concerns with 7%. These results point to the conclusion that there are literally no differences between the perceptions of the biggest concerns in both Eastern and Western Europe when a 10-year period is considered.

Figure 4. Percentage of national concerns in the Western member-states of the European Union (2013-2017).



Source: Authors.

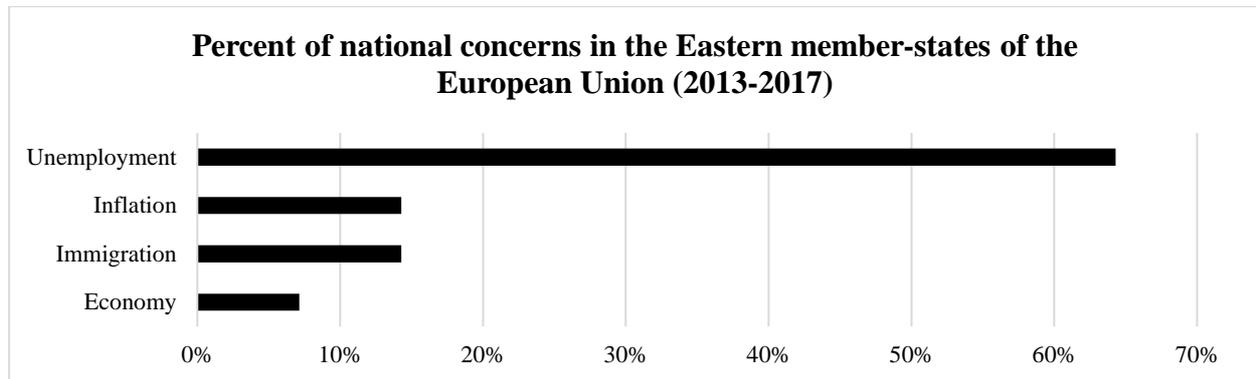
Figure 5. Percent of national concerns in the Eastern member-states of the European Union (2008-2017).



Source: Authors.

Figure 6 shows, similarly to the concerns of Western Europeans in the longer time-frame, the ones of Eastern Europeans for the shorter, 5-year time-frame, that almost fully replicate the ones discussed above. Unemployment is still the leading concern, followed by inflation and immigration that all have 14%, and concerns about the economy with 7%. Compared to the 10-year period, the shorter one (2013-2017) reveals the same characteristics as the former but with somewhat increased support for immigration and inflation, that are, still far behind the 64% support for unemployment as a major concern. The Eastern European citizens supporting immigration as the most pressing concern (14%) are significantly less than the ones in Western Europe (36%). A possible explaining factor lays in the series of terrorist attacks perpetrated by ISIS in Western and not Eastern Europe – a fact that was exploited by right-wing populist parties supporting narratives that inspire fear of issues typical for the right-wing populist agenda.

Figure 6. Percentage of national concerns in the Eastern member-states of the European Union (2013-2017).



Source: Authors.

## Discussion

The results presented in the section above suggest two major findings. First, the biggest issues that Europeans see on a national level are left-wing concerns but the predominant type of populism in the states is right-wing one. Second, Eastern and Western European states are not that different in terms of the predominant concerns, despite their historical, cultural and economic differences. These findings, in contrast to what the literature suggests, create some room for a further discussion. The lack of similar studies exploring the relationship between populism and national concerns is not allowing us to compare the results from this research with other inquiries. However, in this section, some context of the problem is provided and mainly to the question if there are economic rather than cultural and social concerns that are predominant in the EU, then to what we could attribute the lack of success of the left-wing populist and the growing popularity of right-wing parties.

Our findings point to an interesting paradox: the predominant concerns are left-wing in nature and yet the voters choose right-wing populist parties over left-wing populist parties. Politicians from the right-wing populist spectrum do not change their programs based on the concerns of the citizens but instead, they skillfully endeavor to adapt the conditions that different events create in order to bolster their right-wing agenda despite the overwhelming amount of left-wing concerns of the Europeans. Thus, they attempt to incorporate right-wing solutions to left-wing concerns, for instance to resolve an unemployment problem through blocking immigration. Moreover, the motive of vilifying a particular group of the population by attributing major concerns that they supposedly create has much more power due to its applicability to a very wide range of topics. In addition, it is much easier to control a narrative about an enemy than to face economic problems that deserve proper attention, concrete reforms and are generally much harder to be

managed. Campbell (1998) links this enemy creation to the state's identity that protects the citizens from threats, as a way to reaffirm its role as an authority distributing public goods, including security. Another reason why right-wing populism has been so widely successful is that it provides much more clarity of its political program to the voter than the traditional parties (Canovan 2002). Moreover, a left-wing populist party would also be hardly understood by the average voter mainly because of the specifics that the economist terminology poses. As opposed to this tendency, the right-wing populists have easily comprehensible manifestos that rely on emotions and symbols, rather than on stable socio-economic programs – a fact that makes them appealing to the masses that find themselves in a transition to a “postindustrial capitalism” (Betz 1993: 665). Yilmaz (2012: 377) explains the success of right-wing populism by a change from the economic division in society to a division between the different cultures, as the latter has become increasingly important for the ontological security of the Europeans. He continues by outlining why the left-wing parties suffered from the discourse that the right-wing populists created and maintain:

The populist right managed to frame media debates, via ongoing moral panics around immigrants' 'cultural' behaviors, in such a way that political parties of all persuasions are forced to respond continually to ever fresh scandals and intentional provocations. They thus tacitly accept the premises for these so-called debates (Yilmaz, 2011). Whatever the differences between political platforms, the basic antagonism produces its own culturally defined social divisions, making it impossible to articulate alternative visions under given conditions. This is what paralyzes social democrats.

Our study showed that Europeans across the two geographical regions keep sharing left-wing concerns about unemployment, the economy, and inflation, despite the growing tensions about immigration between 2013-2017. However, populist parties in the EU belong, to an overwhelming extent, to the far-right. The explanation for this lack of overlap between what is needed by the public opinion and what is delivered in the political spectrum adds arguments to the question whether right-wing populist parties respond to the most pressing public concerns or merely shift the focus toward an agenda that is easier to control. An example of this is the Greek left-wing populist party Syriza and the political difficulties it suffered by adhering to a left-wing rather than right-wing agenda (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). It placed itself in an impossible situation from which it either had to suffer a defeat ideologically or a political defeat since the antagonistic relationship that it created with the lenders from the EU was the only one capable of alleviating the severe financial crisis in the country (Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos and Tzagkarakis, 2017). On a supranational level, a study by Ivarsflaten (2008: 3) examined the three mobilizational patterns of populist parties

– “economic changes, political elitism and corruption, and immigration” and in particular determined which one is responsible for the success of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. She found that the appeal to immigration issues is the factor without which the right-wing populist parties did not perform well on elections. That said, it could be derived that left-wing populist parties relying heavily on political manifestos that accentuate economic and class issues in society were not as successful as their right-wing counterparts.

## Conclusion

In the era of a new wave of populism in Europe, it is important to distinguish between the types of populism, the goals that they pursue, and to what extent these political parties are a response to actual concerns shared by voters. In this study, we explored the link between the two variations of populism – the right-wing and the left-wing and perceptions of problems in EU member-states. In addition, we compared the concerns in Eastern and Western Europe. Our results refuted the idea that, because of their economic, historical, cultural and societal characteristics, their needs and concerns were fundamentally different. We also found a lack of overlap between the concerns shared by EU-citizens, belonging to the left-wing domain – unemployment, inflation and economic concerns, and the right-wing populist parties that notably surpass the number of left-wing populist parties. Having established that the predominant type of populism in the EU, the far-right, does not seek to address public concerns in regard to the economic sector, we identified a few factors that could have engendered this tendency. Among them is the appeal of the narrative about the “enemy” that is in the core of the immigration debate. It shifted the attention of both the voters and the traditional parties from conversations about concrete political measures and reforms to improving the socio-economic indicators. At the same time, left-wing parties are at a significant disadvantage in comparison to the right-wing ones because of the dilemma that they inevitably face – how to improve the nation’s economy in a globalized, interconnected world, by economic self-sufficiency and by cutting ties with major organizations and institutions of international significance. In theory, in various EU-states with increased presence of left-wing populist parties (i.e. Greece, Ireland, Spain), the economic challenges were becoming so unmanageable to deal with domestic measures that the only choice left was to continue the dialogue with the EU and the other transnational partners despite the inherent antipathy of populist parties towards multilateral organizations and institutions.

Considering these factors, it would be logical if the literature further explores to what extent the public opinion is shaping the profile of populist parties. In addition to this, it would be beneficial to study the extent of the opposite phenomenon, i.e. populist parties that, dominating the political debate, divert the focus of left-wing concerns by offering right-wing solutions that are much more

easily created, applied, and supported through the presence of a common cultural enemy that could be also blamed for economic shortcomings.

## References

Acemoglu, Daron, Egorov, Georgy and Konstantin Sonin (2013): 'A political theory of populism'. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128(2), pp. 771-805. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjs077>.

Arditi, Benjamin (2007): *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism. Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bakker, Bert N., Rooduijn, Matthijs, and Schumacher, Gijs (2015): 'The psychological roots of populist voting: Evidence from the United States, the Netherlands and Germany'. *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 55, Issue 2, pp. 302-320. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12121>.

Bale, Tim (2013): 'More and More Restrictive—But Not Always Populist: Explaining Variation in the British Conservative Party's Stance on Immigration and Asylum'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 21(1), pp. 25–37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2013.766474>.

Bartolini, Stefano (2011): 'Political parties, ideology and populism in the post-crisis Europe', Poros Conference, 7-10 July 2011. Accessible at: <http://europeanseminars.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Stefano-Bartolini-Paper.pdf>.

BBC (2016, March 04): 'Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts'. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911> (July 11, 2018).

Betz, Hans-Georg (1993): 'The Two Faces of Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe'. *The Review of Politics*, 55(4), pp. 663-686, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500018040>.

British Office for National Statistics (July, 2018): 'Time series: Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted)'. Accessible at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsx> (July 18, 2018).

Campbell, David (1998): *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*. University of Minnesota Press.

Canovan, Margaret (2002): 'Taking politics to the people: Populism as the ideology of democracy', in Mény, Yves, and Surel, Yves (eds.) *Democracies and the populist challenge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25-44.

Frum, David (2017): 'The Toxic Politics of Migration in the Czech Republic'. The Atlantic. Accessible at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/czech-elections/543669/> (July 16, 2018)

Fuest, Clemens (2017): 'Populist economic policy and how to respond to it'. Euraktiv, Accessible at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/opinion/populist-economic-policy-and-how-to-respond-to-it/> (July 2, 2018).

Gidron, Noam and Bonikowski, Bart (2013): 'Varieties of Populism'. Harvard Working Paper Series, No. 13-0004, Accessible at [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/gidron\\_bonikowski\\_populismlitreview\\_2013.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/gidron_bonikowski_populismlitreview_2013.pdf) (November 13, 2018).

Guiso, Luigi, Herrera, Helios, Morelli, Massimo and Sonno, Tommaso (2017): 'Populism: Demand and Supply'. Center for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper 11871. Accessible at: <http://www.heliosherrera.com/populism.pdf> (November 13, 2018).

Hawkins, Kirk Andrew, Riding, Scott, and Mudde, Cas (2012): 'Measuring populist attitudes'. Political Concepts Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series, 55, pp. 1-35.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Norris, Pippa (2016): 'Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash'. Harvard Kennedy School, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, RWP16-026. Accessible at: <https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/getFile.aspx?Id=1401> (November 13, 2018).

Ionescu, Ghita, and Gellner, Ernest (1969): *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ivarsflaten, Elisabeth (2008). 'What unites right-wing populists in Western Europe? Re-examining grievance mobilization models in seven successful cases'. *Comparative Political Studies*, 41(1), pp. 3-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006294168>.

Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira (2014): 'The responses of populism to Dahl's democratic dilemmas'. *Political Studies*, 62(3), pp. 470-487. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12038>.

Koster (de), Willem, Achterberg, Peter, and van der Waal, Jeroen (2013): 'The new right and the welfare state: The electoral relevance of welfare chauvinism and welfare populism in the Netherlands'. *International Political Science Review*, 34(1), pp. 3-20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512112455443>.

Laclau, Ernesto (2005): *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Lowndes, Joseph (2012): 'The Past and Future of Race in the Tea Party Movement', in Trost, Christine and Rosenthal, Lawrence (eds.) *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 152-70.

Madrid, Raul L. (2008): 'The Rise of Ethnopolitism in Latin America'. *World Politics*, 60(3), pp. 475-508. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100009060>.

Mavrozacharakis, Emmanouil, Kotroyannos, Dimitrios and Tzagkarakis, Stylianos Ioannis (2017): 'Mediterranean Left-Wing Populism: The Case of SYRIZA'. *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities*, 6(2), pp. 40-54. Accessible at: [https://www.etracker.com/lnkcnt.php?et=qPKGYV&url=https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/51522/ssoar-eqpam-2017-2-mavrozacharakis\\_et\\_al-Mediterranean\\_Left-Wing\\_Populism\\_The\\_Case.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-eqpam-2017-2-mavrozacharakis\\_et\\_al-Mediterranean\\_Left-Wing\\_Populism\\_The\\_Case.pdf](https://www.etracker.com/lnkcnt.php?et=qPKGYV&url=https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/51522/ssoar-eqpam-2017-2-mavrozacharakis_et_al-Mediterranean_Left-Wing_Populism_The_Case.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-eqpam-2017-2-mavrozacharakis_et_al-Mediterranean_Left-Wing_Populism_The_Case.pdf) (November 13, 2018).

Meny Yves, and Surel Yves (2000): *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mudde, Cas (2004): 'The Populist Zeitgeist'. *Government and opposition*, 39(4), pp. 541-563. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira (eds.) (2012): *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira (2013): 'Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America'. *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), pp. 147-174. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11>.

Mukand, Sharun and Rodrik, Dani (2017): 'The Political Economy of Liberal Democracy' (April 24, 2017). CESifo Working Paper Series No. 6433. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2973082> (November 12, 2018).

Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2012): 'Indicators of integration 2012, Czech Republic'. Accessible at: <https://www.oecd.org/migration/integration-indicators-2012/keyindicatorsbycountry/name,218310,en.htm> (July 16, 2018).

Otjes, Simon and Louwse, Tom (2015): 'Populists in Parliament: Comparing Left-Wing and Right-Wing Populism in the Netherlands'. *Political Studies*, 63(1), pp. 60-79. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12089>.

Reynié, Dominique (2016): 'Heritage Populism' and France's National Front'. *Journal of Democracy* 27(4), pp. 47-57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0061>.

Rode, Martin and Revuelta, Julio (2015): 'The Wild Bunch! An empirical note on populism and economic institutions'. *Economics of Governance*, 16(1), pp. 73-96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10101-014-0154-5>.

Rodrik, Dani (2017): 'Populism and the economics of globalization'. NBER Working Paper No. 23559.

Rooduijn, Mathijs (2017): 'What unites the voter bases of populist parties? Comparing the electorates of 15 populist parties'. *European Political Science Review*, 10:3, pp. 351-368. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773917000145>.

Statistics Denmark (2018): 'Unemployment'. Accessible at: <https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/arbejde-indkomst-og-formue/arbejdsloshed> (July 17, 2018).

Statistics Sweden (2005): 'Unemployed persons aged 15-74 (LFS) by duration of unemployment, sex and age. Month 2005M04 - 2018M05'. Accessible at: [http://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/START\\_AM\\_AM0401\\_AM0401L/NA\\_KUARblosaTM/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=73adb9f3-d251-4c73-847c-98fa2ffad0a5](http://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/START_AM_AM0401_AM0401L/NA_KUARblosaTM/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=73adb9f3-d251-4c73-847c-98fa2ffad0a5) (July 18, 2018).

Stavrakakis, Yannis and Katsambekis, Giorgos (2014): 'Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA'. *Journal of political ideologies*, 19(2), pp. 119-142. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266>.

Taggart, Paul (2000): *Populism. Concepts in the social sciences*. Philadelphia: Open.

The Swedish Institute (2018a): 'Sweden and migration: The refugee challenge'. Accessible at: <https://sweden.se/migration/#2015> (July 11, 2018).

The Swedish Institute (2018b): 'Sweden and migration: The integration issue'. Accessible at: <https://sweden.se/migration/#2013> (July 11, 2018).

Urbinati, Nadia (1998): 'Democracy and Populism'. *Constellations*. 5(1), pp. 110-124.

Yılmaz, Ferruh (2011): 'The Politics of the Danish Cartoon Affair: Hegemonic Intervention by the Extreme Right'. *Communication studies*, 62(1), pp. 5-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.533340>.

Yılmaz, Ferruh (2012): 'Right-wing hegemony and immigration: How the populist far-right achieved hegemony through the immigration debate in Europe'. *Current Sociology*, 60(3), pp. 368-381. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392111426192>.

### Appendix: List of populist parties in the European Union

Country	Party name	Type of populism
Austria	FPO	Right
Belgium	Vlaams Belang	Right
Bulgaria <sup>3</sup>	United Patriots	Right
Croatia	Human Blockade	Both
Cyprus	Citizens Alliance	Right
Czech Republic	ANO 2011	Right
Denmark	People's Party	Right
Estonia	Centre Party	Both
Finland	The Finns	Right
France	Front National	Right
Germany	Alternative For Germany	Right
Greece	Syriza	Left
Hungary	Fidesz	Right
Ireland <sup>4</sup>	Sinn Fein	Left
Italy	Five Star Movement	Both
Latvia	National Alliance	Right
Lithuania	Order and Justice	Right
Luxembourg <sup>5</sup>	Alternative Democratic Reform	Right
Malta	Maltese Patriots Movement	Right
Netherlands	Party for Freedom	Right
Poland	Law and Justice	Right
Portugal	National Renovator Party	Right
Romania	Greater Romania Party	Right
Slovakia	Smer-SD	Left
Slovenia	Slovenian National Party	Right
Spain	Podemos	Left
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	Right
United Kingdom	UK Independence Party	Right

<sup>3</sup> The Bulgarian nationalist parties united for the last Parliamentary elections in 2017. However, they were still separate parties for the European Elections and did not get more than 3% each.

<sup>4</sup> Sinn Fein is not a populist party *per se* but is considered to have attracted most of the vote of people discontented with the status quo.

<sup>5</sup> Luxembourg has as a couple of soft populist features, railing against elitist public spending, and soft Euroscepticism, but not populist as such.