



Addressing European Populism from a Sustainability Policy Perspective

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Introduction

This European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) Quarterly Report (QR) seeks to address European populism from a sustainability policy perspective. This QR provides an in-depth exploration and lines of explanation to the rise of populism in Europe over the past few years and the role it plays in the policy-making process with respect to sustainable development and sustainability policy. A special focus will be put on how this could have an impact on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Chapter 1 of this Report focuses on understanding the concept and phenomenon of populism, as well as its recent global headway. Chapter 1 opens the discussion regarding the potential incongruence between populist agendas and sustainable development and the SDGs.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the current development of populism in Europe, from north to south. Chapter 2 also highlights linkages between right-wing populist parties and climate change measures.

Chapter 3 looks more closely at reactions of sustainability to rising populism. As this is an underexplored area, chapter 3 discusses potential underlying factors of populism and whether, and how, the SDGs can provide a platform for action in answering the rise of populism.

The reflections section of this QR not only focuses on identifying trends across European countries regarding populism, but also seeks to use the insights gained from the 17th ESDN Workshop “Transformation towards Sustainability in Times of Rising Populism”, to illuminate possible pathways forward regarding how sustainability policy and environmental policy can better respond to rising populism. The Workshop took place in Berlin on 23-24 May, 2019 and involved policymakers and other experts in the fields of sustainability policy and populism.

Chapter 1: Potential Incongruences between Populism and Sustainable Development

What is Populism?

Populism on both sides of the political spectrum is **gaining ground all over the world**, including in some of the largest economies in the world, and more worryingly so, in some of the world's longest standing democracies.¹ Populism is a **complex phenomenon**, which can be understood through different analytical lenses: as an ideology, a strategy or as a discourse.² Although there is no one uncontested theory of populism or coherent criteria for what constitutes a populist party, populism is often described as anti-elitist and anti-pluralist (opposing cultural heterogeneity), with populist parties claiming to exclusively represent the best interests of the 'ordinary people'.³ A prominent researcher on populism, Cass Mudde, states that populism contains: (i) a vision of society as divided into two groups, the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elites'; (ii) internal homogeneity of the two groups; (iii) the opposition between the two groups; and (iv) the 'pure people' as the legitimate source of the general will.⁴ Overall, populism is often described as containing three core-elements of anti-establishment, authoritarianism, and nativism.⁵

The **rise of populism** is often argued to be a reaction of **discontent to conventional politics and globalism**. Although populist movements were already gaining ground in the 1970s, the development gained serious momentum through the economic recessions of the 1990s and the late 2000s. Studies often couple the concept of rising populism with economic recessions, growing levels of inflation, unemployment, austerity, income inequality, immigration, trade and financial openness, and, in some geographical locations, resource abundance.⁶ In Europe, the growing inequalities (income, dichotomy between rural and urban populations) has led to populist upsurge, displaying clear disapproval of 'the ruling elite'. One recent example of such an upsurge, which received a lot of media coverage, was the Yellow Vests (*gilets jaunes*) movement in France. This movement, triggered by the rise of fuel prices following a new tax, was deeply rooted in the discontent with the elite and critique of policies and politics disproportionately affecting different classes of society.⁷ Evidence from different populist movements around the world suggests that populism is not only triggered by economic factors, but also less tangible factors, such as the psychological state and perceived identity of a group of people – e.g. preservation of social and cultural capital (as is one of the aspiration of the *gilet jaunes*).^{8,9} Although context dependent and unique, populism tends to include a strong advocacy for nationalism, which, in most cases, is articulated and justified in the name of exclusion and often racialized rhetoric of 'the people', as well as the demonization of a perceived threat or enemy (internal and/or external), and support for authoritarian leaders who rise to power on the basis of protecting and strengthening the nation.¹⁰

Populism has characteristics of cynicism and a lack of trust for existing authorities. This could be discontent towards government officials and elected politicians, as well as towards multinational

¹ McCarthy, 2019

² Heinisch, 2018

³ Müller, 2019

⁴ Mudde, 2007

⁵ Akkerman et al., 2013; Ingelhart & Norris, 2016

⁶ Stankov, 2018

⁷ Guilluy, 2018

⁸ Henley, 2018

⁹ Guilluy, 2018

¹⁰ McCarthy, 2019

corporations, media, and scientific experts, etc. Populist parties tend to portray themselves as representing the voice of the 'ordinary people' while propagating mono-culturalism over multiculturalism, national self-interest over international cooperation, and traditionalism over liberal social values and cosmopolitanism.¹¹ In this sense, populism, which is often related to fears about globalization and the failure of current mainstream parties to address social problems, becomes opportunistic in responding to the growing fear and discontent of citizens by providing 'simple answers to complex questions'.¹²

Is all populism bad?

Populism is unique to the context in which it arises and there are important distinctions between left-wing and right-wing populism, as well as to what exactly the underlying factors contributing to the rise of populism are. Populism in Europe, for example, has been primarily right-wing and strongly linked to Euroscepticism and anti-immigration. In Africa and the Middle East, however, populism is more often linked to left-wing ideologies railing against government corruption and incompetence and thereby acting as a challenging force towards complacency and governments' tendency to marginalise minorities. While the majority of European populist parties are seen as problematic, due to their xenophobic and divisive messages, African populists often build strong multi-ethnic support bases around issues of wealth distribution.¹³

To bring nuance to the picture, some studies have suggested that populism is actually a form of democratic expression, as it entails mobilisation and critique against current neoliberal policies and a system that has failed to deliver on its promises. Ascribing to this argument, populist movements may have the potential to bring people, disconnected from mainstream politics, back into national conversations and thereby overcome their sense of alienation. However, populist rhetoric often resorts to nativism and identifying external threats rather than providing a durable alternative.¹⁴ Populism, as manifested particularly in Europe and North America, can pose a real threat to democratic, liberal norms and values.¹⁵

"The danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world – the political actors posing the danger speak the language of democratic values. That the end result is a form of politics that is blatantly antidemocratic should trouble us all – and demonstrate the need for nuanced political judgement to help us determine precisely where democracy ends and populist peril begins." – Jan-Werner Müller, Professor of Politics, Princeton University

Seeing the rise of populism as a reaction to a flawed system can also provide grounds for reaction, adaptation and change of governance structures and policies by both mainstream parties and counter movements. In an article about authoritarianism, populism and the environment, James McCarthy writes: "Although we hear largely about the alleged polarisation, what those superficially opposed movements have in common is a rejection of neoliberal hegemony and the articulation of genuine alternatives. That suggests that this could be a moment of hope and opportunity as well, if the left is able to articulate positive radical alternatives that are broad, inclusive, and sustainable."¹⁶ Hence, the discontent manifested in populism should be a wakeup call for mainstream parties and oppositional movements not to succumb to populist rhetoric, but rather propose alternatives that address the underlying factors of populism.

¹¹ Ingelhart & Norris, 2016

¹² Wadok (ed), 2013

¹³ Cheeseman, et al. 2018

¹⁴ Mouffe, 2016

¹⁵ Cheeseman, et al. 2018

¹⁶ McCarthy, 2019, p.302

Populism and Sustainability

As discussed in the section above, populism is driven largely by discontent with the prevailing political systems. In this context, a worsening natural environment that could lead to suggested sanctions (taxes, lower rates of economic growth, etc.) may contribute to further fuel this discontent. Although **very little is researched on the link between populism and sustainability**, more can be said about populist parties' reaction to climate change and environmental protection measures. Often, populist parties oppose climate protection measures, as: a) agreements tend to be multilateral and require cooperation beyond national borders, and; b) parties fear that such agreements could impact the domestic economy negatively.¹⁷ Up until the mid-1980s, politicians from both sides of the political spectrum addressed the challenge of climate change. Now, however, the increase of right-wing populist parties seems to feed climate change denialism (and vice versa)¹⁸; researcher on climate change denialism Martin Hultman said in an interview with German newspaper *Deutsche Welle* that: "The increase of climate change denial has also contributed to the growth of right-wing nationalists, because there are some overlapping features. For example, not wanting to deal with global issues and only thinking in nationalist terms. Another overlap is that both right-wing nationalists and climate change deniers are portraying the elites as the people who are lying. They describe the researchers and UN delegates as the elite that are against the people."¹⁹ The most visible and concrete reactions of this link can be seen in the sway of commitment to previous climate agreements by countries with populist leaders. For example, the US announcing its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change; Brazil revoking its offer to host this year's UN climate conference with claims that Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon was at stake; or the increasing trend of EU right-wing populist parties having second thoughts on previously stipulated climate targets (Hungary and Bulgaria). In other words, **environmentalism is often seen as part of a liberal, internationalist agenda that is focused on building global treaties and forging inclusive alliances**, which is not compatible with the nativist and anti-pluralist ideals of the majority of populist parties.²⁰

There are a few **links that can be drawn between populism, sustainability and the SDGs**. Considering the similarities of features between SDGs and climate change measures (multilateral agreements, international collaboration, advocated by the scientific community e.g. UN bodies), and the documented opposition to these features (when related to climate change measures) by populist parties, the likelihood of opposition towards the SDGs and 2030 Agenda implementation may be quite high.²¹ Hence, the **populist parties' focus on national and domestic concerns may be antagonistic to the collaborative and international governance structures associated with the SDGs**. Moreover, as has been outlined above, a reoccurring theme of populist rhetoric is advocating 'simple solutions' to complex problems and, more often than not, blaming a specific group for being the root-cause of societal problems. **As there is no 'quick-fix' to sustainability or to implementing the 2030 Agenda, this may be a societal challenge that populist parties strategically shy away from.** Another feature of the 'simple solutions', as seen in countries such as the US or Poland, is focusing on economic growth and job-creation by investing in sectors that have a negative environmental impact; such as expanding e.g. coal mining. This may contribute to decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) but have a detrimental impact on the environment and surrounding habitats (SDG 13 and SDG 15), not to mention respiratory health (SDG 3).

Although populist parties may be less inclined than their mainstream counterparties to implement international agreements, the SDGs can also be a way for citizens to hold their countries responsible to certain actions, as well as benchmark them with the progress of other countries' work in

¹⁷ Bierbach, 2019

¹⁸ Lockwood, 2018

¹⁹ Brändlin, 2018

²⁰ Machin & Wagener, 2019

²¹ Brändlin, 2018

implementing the 2030 Agenda. Hence, the SDGs can be an important tool in holding governments accountable for their sustainable development progress.²²



Although the socioeconomic concerns and discontent of the public, which fuels rising populism, are legitimate, populism, on both sides of the political spectrum, becomes problematic when resorting to racialized rhetoric, and the demonization of a perceived threat or enemy in a 'scapegoat' manner.^{23,24} In Europe, this is increasingly evident in the use of a strongly xenophobic discourse and rhetoric by populist parties, which is becoming more and more normalised and apparent in countries from north to south. This development is in direct conflict with SDG 10, which seeks to eliminate discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for all.

There seems to be at least two levels of linkages between populism and sustainability – on the one hand, one can argue that they are both a form of reaction to perceived and actual societal issues. On the other hand, the fundamentals of the two concepts are antagonistic in terms of discourse worldviews; populism stands for national interests at the expense of cosmopolitanism, but also the provision for the 'ordinary people' at the expense of those defined as the 'threat' to a particular lifestyle. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, however, stand for an inclusive process, which brought together states, civil society organisations, and the public through an innovative survey with millions of responses.

What should be noted, however, is that populist parties do not oppose efforts to tackle sustainable development issues per se, but rather favours national interests over international cooperation and tends to propose solutions to strengthen sovereignty and the economy of the state (e.g. energy and resource use). A handful of populist parties in Europe, for example, support renewable energy in their party programmes and/or public statements, but with an emphasis on localism and the perceived benefits of such a focus for reduced energy dependence, creating job opportunities, and/or improving quality of life.²⁵

Although the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is done on a national level, populist parties are often reluctant or sceptical of international agreements, as that entails 'supranational governance efforts and cooperation', whereas the main aim of the majority of populist parties is to strengthen the nation they perceive themselves as representing. This poses a challenge to **the international cooperative governance and universalism** that characterises the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, SDG 17 states, "a successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. These inclusive partnerships built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, are needed at the global, regional, national and local level." Given that the populist rhetoric advocates for less international collaboration and more nativism, this would appear to be in direct conflict with the intention of SDG 17.



²² Open Democracy, 2017

²³ Jones, 2007

²⁴ McCarthy, 2019

²⁵ Schaller & Carius, 2019

Chapter 2: Populism's Rise in Europe

Europe is by no means an exception from the rise of populism. In fact, the continent has seen a **sharp increase in populist influence over the past 20 years**. At the end of 2018, *The Guardian* presented data on the share of populist votes from 1998 to 2018 for 31 European countries, showing that, two decades ago, populist parties were a marginal force, with just 7% of votes across the continent; this number has more than tripled to 25% in the most recent elections.²⁶ Populists have gained ground across the political spectrum in Europe, and although the main increase has been in right-wing parties, the trend also shows a rise in left-wing challenger parties, such as *Podemos* in Spain, *Syriza* in Greece and *La France Insoumise*.

*"There are three main reasons for the sharp rise of populism in Europe. The great recession, which created a few strong left populist parties in the south, the so-called refugee crisis, which was a catalyst for right populists, and finally the transformation of non-populist parties – notably Fidesz and Law and Justice."*²⁷

- Cas Mudde, Professor, School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia

The spread of populism across Europe has different characteristics. The largest increase in populist votes has been made in central and Eastern Europe, all four Visegrád countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) are governed by populist parties. In Hungary, for example, Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* secured 63% of the votes in the 2018 election. Following the 2008 recession, the countries most affected saw similar developments. In Greece, for example, the radical left-wing populist party, blaming Eurocratic austerity, acquired almost a third of the votes, and similar trends could be seen in Italy. In Germany, the anti-immigration, right-wing party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) has entered the national parliament and holds more than 90 seats in the *Bundestag* and, in Italy, the far-right League and the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement won nearly 50% of the popular vote. In the UK, Ukip (*UK Independence Party*), regardless of not being in government, managed to fuel support for the Brexit vote, and, in France, Marine Le Pen received 33% of the vote in the presidential election, while the Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreich*) gained 26% in the last federal election in October 2017 and is now in the ruling government coalition.²⁸

Northern Europe is experiencing similar developments, with the far-right populist parties gaining momentum over the past decade. In Sweden, for example, the Swedish Democrats (with right-wing extremist origins) went from 0.4% of the votes in 1998 to 17.6% in the 2018 election. In Denmark, the populist party (*Danish People's Party*) has been a part of a centre-right minority government since 2015. Other parties have been extremely reluctant in forming coalition governments with populist parties previously, but this has now become reality in both Norway and Finland.

Although the overall proportion of votes cast for populist parties has risen, some countries are experiencing a decline. In Belgium, the Flemish nationalist party has declined in popularity for a decade. Another common trend is that when populist parties do enter government, they are forced to compromise and their (sometimes extreme) promises are left unfulfilled (as seen in e.g. Finland, Greece, Denmark, and the UK). However, even when populist parties do not manage to rally enough votes to govern, their rhetoric still manages to leave a strong imprint on the political agenda, sway public opinion, and tends to normalise xenophobic or anti-establishment discourses. To put this into a European-wide context, in 1998, 12.5 million Europeans lived in a country with at least one populist cabinet member and in 2018, that number has risen to 170.2 million.²⁹

²⁶ Lewis et al. 2018

²⁷ Cas Mudde in *The Guardian*, 2018

²⁸ Schaller & Carius, 2019

²⁹ Lewis et al. 2018

European Populism and Sustainability

The complex relation between populism and sustainability is a scarcely investigated phenomenon; perhaps due to populism being such an intricate and context-dependent phenomenon in itself. Hence, there is no one-size-fits-all explanation of populism's impact on the SDGs (or vice versa). However, parallels have been drawn between populism (in particular right-wing) and opposition to climate change legislation and international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement as seen e.g. in Brazil and the US. However, how do these linkages look in the 'mosaic of countries' that is Europe?

One example of populist parties' reaction to sustainability was the prevention of an effort to raise the EU's supply of renewable energy to 35% of the electricity mix by 2030 by EU Member States led by populist governments (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) in May 2018, even though the effort had the support of the European Parliament and European Commission.³⁰ The countries managed to stymie the effort by propagating the importance of sovereign rights in national states over resource use, even if that resource use may have negative effects on the climate. Thus, in line with the discussion on populism above, populist parties tend to advocate for measures that have perceived national benefits, regardless of whether they are climate friendly, which in turn may have a negative impact on global climate action (SGD 13).



Examples of this trend can be seen in the case of Poland not giving up its 'strategic fossil fuel' of coal, and Bulgaria favouring gas infrastructure projects over energy efficiency projects.³¹ As populism often entails **opposing 'globalist' ideas for the benefit of national interests**, populist governments are starting to have second thoughts about international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement. Populist leaders may still recognise climate change, but propose national solutions, such as in e.g. Italy and France (two countries in which populist parties make references to combating climate change in their manifests), or they may deny threats of global warming, as recognising such would be antagonistic to national interests of energy use, as in e.g. Bulgaria. A survey done by Climate Action Network Europe (CAN) in 2018 shows that the more to the right a party is, the more likely it is to oppose measures to combat climate change. Thus, the rise of right-wing populism may prove a real threat to stricter environmental legislation, for example.³²

The complexity and large efforts required to achieve sustainable development also seems to fuel populist counter-argument, for example, the perceived "unachievable targets" on renewable energy and the objective of transitioning to electric vehicles by 2020 has been coupled with loss of voters' faith in e.g. Germany.³³ Perhaps the **easy solutions to complex problems** that populism is suggesting is both easier to understand and buy into, as it entails putting the blame elsewhere, as opposed to making drastic and perhaps more costly changes that impact 'national well-being'.³⁴ Another aspect that has led to populist resistance is the perception of climate efforts not having the desired outcome, or perhaps affecting groups of society differently. As was seen in the Yellow Vests movement in France, triggered by a tax on diesel fuel, where protestors echoed that the tax was not about solving climate change impacts from mobility, and that revenues raised would not be reinvested into clean alternatives and infrastructures (especially in areas with limited alternatives and readily available substitutes). The protestors stated that that this "is not climate change legislation. It is the worst kind

³⁰ Stronberg, 2018

³¹ Stronberg, 2018

³² Climate Action Network, 2018

³³ Simon, 2018

³⁴ Lockwood, 2018

of money grab – one that steals from the least able to pay.”³⁵ This movement and reaction further shows that populism is not only linked to xenophobic discourse and strong nationalism, but is also a way to mobilise citizens around issues of e.g. income inequality and perceived alienation of citizens by political leaders.³⁶ In this instance, the reaction pinpointed to the importance of considering impact and trade-offs of policies to ensure that they are both comprehensive and able to alleviate social inequality.³⁷

A recent study of national electoral programmes, public statements by party leaders and spokespersons, press releases and news sources of the strongest 21 European right-wing populist parties by Adelphi shows that 7 out of the 21 European right-wing populist parties expressed scepticism towards the scientific consensus on human-induced climate change or openly denied its existence.³⁸ The study also found that 11 parties were inconsistent or did not attribute importance to environmental challenges (some of which had their own alternative strategies to tackle climate change challenges). Only 3 parties expressed support of the consensus on climate change (Hungary’s *Fidez*, The *Finns Party*, and the Latvian *National Alliance*).³⁹ Regardless of **denying or not supporting the scientific consensus** on human-induced climate change, populist parties may still advocate for sustainable energy transformation if it benefits the nation and the “core people” directly.⁴⁰ For example, a number of populist parties in Europe exhibit a type of “green patriotism” supporting environmental conservation, or renewable energy instalment, for the sake of clean air and/or energy independence.⁴¹

³⁵ Kumar, 2018

³⁶ Guilluy, 2018

³⁷ Schaller & Carius, 2019

³⁸ Schaller & Carius, 2019

³⁹ Schaller & Carius, 2019

⁴⁰ Fraune & Knodt, 2018

⁴¹ Schaller & Carius, 2019

Chapter 3: Populist Reactions to Environmental and Climate Change Policy

A phenomenon that is better investigated than the reactions of environmental policy to rising populism is the reaction of populism towards sustainability policy. Briefly touched upon above, the rise of populist parties often goes hand in hand with scepticism towards prevalent political strategies, (scientific) expertise, and international collaboration. This scepticism is justified by populists by stating that prevalent paradigms do not necessarily have the best interests of ‘the people’ in mind (which the populist parties, in opposition, claim to represent). Most prominently, the reactions of right-wing populist parties towards climate change measures have been studied⁴², as well as the relation between left-wing populism and environmental policy, and eco-populism.⁴³ The previously mentioned study by Schaller and Carius shows that although the tendency of populist parties to oppose climate and energy transition policies is strong, there are important nuances.

“The analysis of votes in policy fields not related to climate change indicates that right-wing populist parties are relatively positive about environmental topics but hostile towards policies supporting multilateralism and international cooperation. [...] As the share of climate sceptics in European institutions increases, progress and ambition regarding climate policy are increasingly at risk.”
– Stella Schaller & Alexander Carius, authors of the Adelphi report ‘Convenient Truths: Mapping climate agendas of right-wing populist parties in Europe.’

As previously discussed, the populist parties in Europe differ in their stances towards environmental policies and climate action. Where some advocate for renewable energy and better environmental policies (for the benefit of the nation), others push domestic industries with strong negative externalities for the sake of strengthening the national economy. Therefore, there is no one ‘common reaction of populist parties’ towards environmental policy and climate action. One aspect shared by the majority of populist parties is, however, the **reluctance to “sacrifice” national sovereignty for the benefit of international agreements and cross-country collaboration.**

Previous discussions have shown that this is partly due to the perception of international agreements as not contributing to any benefits for the nation. Schaller and Carius argue that the narratives used to counter climate and energy policies perceive climate action as an elitist issue and rooted in economic or social justice grievances.⁴⁴ As such, the authors propose a **need for a positive framing and progressive narrative of climate change in order to empower, inspire and involve citizens.** If a strong reason for turning to populist leadership is a sense of alienation and the perception of mainstream politics as elitist or not representative of the ‘voice of the ordinary people’, then there is a **need for inclusive systems of governance and policy to ensure participation and combat alienation and societal stratification.** Responding to challenges of alienation and framing of environmental and sustainable development challenges, **the 2030 Agenda can offer an inclusive and empowering platform from which action can be mobilised against the strong populist headwinds in Europe.** For example, as the SDGs are backed by measurable indicators, they offer an important opportunity for civil society to hold their countries accountable and benchmark them relative to other countries.⁴⁵

⁴² E.g. Lockwood, 2018; Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Schaller & Carius, 2019

⁴³ Luks, 2014

⁴⁴ Schaller & Carius, 2019

⁴⁵ Open Democracy, 2017

Implementing the 2030 Agenda, and working towards the realisation of the SDGs, can offer important tools in combating the very forces that seem to spur populism. SDG 16, for example, is about promoting **just, peaceful, and inclusive societies**. This SDG, thus, becomes a natural rhetorical launch pad for critiques of the current administration by **inverting populist ideas**, and its focus on measured outcomes offers a valuable tool for activists determined to push back against an administration focused on unravelling a liberal international order. Hence, the discourse familiar to that described above regarding public discontent can, to some extent, be addressed by SDG 16 sub-targets through the development of effective, accountable, and transparent institutions (16.6), and ensure **responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making** (16.7).⁴⁶



Challenges of environmental sustainability is often seen as a ‘valence issue’, meaning that there is a particular consensus on the challenges across a political spectrum. Studies have, however, shown that this might not be the case with right-wing parties (not only populist ones) as they have, in higher numbers, been displaying **scepticism of the scientific consensus** surrounding climate change.⁴⁷ This scepticism is often manifested and directed towards international agreements and collaboration across country borders, thereby placing populist rhetoric in direct conflict with SDG 17 – partnerships for the goals. As argued previously, the relationship between populism and the SDGs is not only that the populist rhetoric is directly antagonistic to the 2030 Agenda, but that the SDGs themselves might also be one of the best tools in responding to the societal challenges fuelling the rise of populism worldwide. The **critique voiced by populist parties and their followers should be taken seriously**, and perhaps this momentum of movements should be considered as an opportunity to address the flaws and weaknesses that allow for such developments in the first place.

The strong wave of populism that is currently being experienced in Europe should not be neglected, as it may provide important opportunities to mobilise citizens in political processes and provide governments with incentives to address weak points that enabled populism to gain a hold in the first place. Schaller and Carius argue that the rise of **populism warrants a reaction of governments to re-design policies to be comprehensive, multi-sectoral and “more creative** to alleviate social inequality”⁴⁸, as well as ensure that the framing of climate change has a more **positive framing to inspire action and the empowerment of citizens**. Although most of the literature discusses the relationship between populism and environmental and climate change policies, much of the complexity and international nature of these challenges are similar to those of sustainable development challenges addressed by the SDGs. Hence, working towards a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda can contribute to:

- Combating underlying factors fuelling populism nationally and internationally;
- Contributing to inclusive processes of citizen engagement and empowerment, increasing accountability of national governments;
- Upholding sustainable development and the SDGs as a valence issue – not to be dependent on a particular political ideology.

Moreover, **responding to the challenges of populism in a constructive manner** can provide a real opportunity for governments to:

- Address challenges of perceived voter alienation and thereby improve democratic processes e.g. voter turnout;

⁴⁶ Open Democracy, 2017

⁴⁷ Gemenis et al. 2012; Lockwood, 2018

⁴⁸ Schaller & Carius, 2019, p.0

- Create stronger platforms for citizen engagement and participation to combat feelings of discontent, misrepresentation and increase citizen involvement in political processes and sustainable development efforts;
- Re-design policies and processes to ensure minimisation of unintended effects;
- Re-evaluate previous efforts to create more coherent and stable policies for sustainable development.

Therefore, seeing populism as a reaction to a flawed system can actually provide momentum to ensure the development of more inclusive, coherent, and sustainable political processes and policies. Instead of dismissing the brewing discontent as illegitimate, mainstream parties and opposition movements should seek to **reshape and develop new ways of designing inclusive and representative governance mechanisms** that contribute to sustainable, representative and legitimate solutions. The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda can both be an important platform to ensure the valence of sustainable development (a global challenge detached from ideology), and a way to inspire action through concrete targets and indicators. The significant part is not what makes sustainable development vulnerable to populism, but rather how the challenges of sustainable development make societies vulnerable to populism. Rethinking populism not as an evil 'other', but rather as an expression of discontent calling for change, may be an opportunity for governments and citizens worldwide to rise to the occasion to design and develop sustainable alternatives that benefit everyone and that leaves no one behind.

Reflections and the Way Forward

The reflections section of this QR not only focuses on identifying trends across European countries regarding populism, but also seeks to use the insights gained from the 17th ESDN Workshop “Transformation towards Sustainability in Times of Rising Populism”, to illuminate possible pathways forward regarding how sustainability policy and environmental policy can better respond to rising populism. This Workshop took place in Berlin on 23-24 May, 2019 and involved policymakers and other experts in the fields of sustainability policy and populism.

The Workshop featured a mixture of keynote speakers and interactive group work and discussions around the themes of populism and sustainability and their frames, causes and effects, as well as the dark side to sustainability and proposing simple solutions to complex issues, as sustainability is a very complex issue. Other keynote speakers and presentations offered insights into counter strategies to combat populism in the European context, as well as a comparative analyses of populism in the Nordic countries and Europe, in general. A full documentation of the Workshop can be found in the [Workshop Report](#) on the ESDN Website. PowerPoint presentations of some of the keynote speakers can also be found on the [ESDN Website](#).

In addition to the keynote presentations on these topics, Workshop participants were given the chance to discuss these themes in small working groups. The results of these interactive group work exchanges are summarized in the pages below and offer not only a summary of the topics looked into, but also provide pathways for moving sustainable development and sustainability policy forward into the future despite the current trend of rising populism in Europe.

A central theme of the discussion and presentations at the ESDN Workshop was to understand the **triggers and drivers of the rise of populism**. The main drivers of populism were argued to be, on the one hand, economic factors such as low growth, increased levels of unemployment, and increased income inequality. Income inequality, status loss due to structural changes of the work market (‘de-industrialisation’), and a perceived dichotomy between urban and rural (with rural areas experiencing depopulation and becoming “forgotten”) were most frequently mentioned in the Workshop discussions and seemed to be of particular salience for the increase of populism in Europe. On the other hand, a trigger (and focus) of populism was attributed to the increase in migration, as this is, by some parts of the population, seen as a ‘threat’ to culture and tradition and a potential economic burden for societies. The discussed and identified triggers of populism are very much mirrored in the literature (see Chapter 1) where the historical increase in (especially right wing) populism is attributed to economic recessions, growing levels of inflation, unemployment, income inequality and immigration. A driver for populism in Europe has also been linked to not only growing income inequalities, but also the increased dichotomy between urban and rural populations, a phenomenon which can also be coupled with an increasing perception of a gap between voters and elected representatives, contributing to a democratic dilemma – with voters feeling unrepresented and discontent with the governing parties and, therefore, looking for ‘counter-alternatives’. Populism, as an instrument to target these societal changes and shortcomings, offers then a movement for discontent, but also advocates for short-term economic targets and cultural homogeneity as a solution.

The Workshop results also highlighted **why populism has gained such a strong foothold in European politics**. Rooted in a discourse of fear, populist parties often rally around alleged ‘threats’ and other ‘enemies’, such as the corrupt elites, an external threat to national culture and traditions (e.g. ‘refugee crisis’), as well as enemies within societies and the fear of change. Populist rhetoric, playing on the ‘fear of the other’ and making use of scapegoat tactics, thus offers “legitimation” for the importance of nativism and exclusion. A crucial discussion point that surfaced during the Workshop was how to address these emotions, as the undercurrents of fear, anxiety and loss cannot be “framed away”, but

rather requires political action in order to understand what people care about and provide for more inclusive processes that take emotions and the management thereof into account.

Similarly to what was argued in Chapter 1, understanding the discontent and fear as legitimate societal critique, can provide momentum and input for **structuring sustainable counter alternatives** to populist solutions. Addressing the “appeal” of populism, the presentations and discussions in the Workshop highlighted that populist parties often suffer shortcomings, for example, the tendency to be short-lived in governments, as they often fail to provide any form of sustainable economic plans or lack details and strategies on how to execute their promises. Furthermore, populist parties have a tendency to advocate for short-term solutions, thereby excluding narratives of ‘the future generations’ and base their claims on overly negative analyses. Politicians and policymakers should, therefore, address these gaps by targeting ‘faulty analyses’ and offering alternatives that contain long-term visions for the benefit of future generations. Moreover, a key aspect that was discussed during the Workshop was to address populist parties for what they really are – xenophobic, nationalistic etc., and thereby ridding them of an ambiguous label and the self-proclaimed representativeness of representing the ‘will of the (true) people’.

Moreover, it was suggested that the rise of populism could be a reaction to the perceived lack of accomplishments by governments in tackling complex issues and providing sustainable alternatives for society. Focusing on **transformation towards sustainability** in times of rising populism, the presentations and group work targeted the ways in which populist parties criticise sustainable development, climate and environmental policies. In populist rhetoric, sustainable development (SD), climate and environmental policy is often seen as being a part of the ‘elite’ discourse and establishment, reflecting a post-materialist, cosmopolitan and urban project requiring a complex and technocratic implementation in conflict with the homogenous, traditional and materialistic narrative. The main arguments usually portrayed by populists against climate policy are that they are economically unfavourable, socially unfair, causing unwanted trade-offs (e.g. wind turbines impacting the natural landscape and fauna), and that they are politically ineffective and illegitimate. Sustainability, the SDGs and climate change policy become an easy target for populist parties, as they are based on complex science, are future oriented (targets seem abstract and intangible), and the discourse of sustainability takes place among the ‘elite’, making it susceptible for populists to consider it a ‘consensus of the elite’. The presentations and discussion focused primarily on the ‘attack’ on climate policy and the SDGs as being a part of the elite and technocratic establishment, but another critique which surfaced was that SD is in itself very future-oriented and complex, whereas populism often offer short-termed solutions rooted in the past (tradition). This can be linked to the strategy of populist parties to offer ‘simple solutions to complex problems’ and the loss of voters’ faith due to governments stipulating “unachievable targets” of climate change mitigation (see the sub-chapter on *populism and sustainability*).

Responding to these challenges and critique, there is a need for SD to adopt and evolve into becoming more practical, tangible and inclusive, while being able to address socioeconomic trade-offs and mitigate inequalities in societies. Addressing the ‘underlying’ drivers of populism and the critique of sustainability policies is a paramount concern for politicians and policy-makers. Since SD policies are criticised by populist parties to be elitist, economically unfavourable and socially unfair, the group work that took place during the Workshop focused on **political counter-measures** to tackle such perceived and existing challenges. The results indicated that the main focus should be to make SD more concrete, practical and local – “where changes can be seen and felt”, but at the same time keep integrating new research and lessons learned and not succumb to populist rhetoric in “oversimplifying” sustainability issues. Another crucial critique which should be addressed is the claim that SD policy is considered socially unfair, as recently demonstrated in the protests in France following imposed taxes on diesel fuel, where the tax was criticised for impacting low-income and rural populations unfairly. The discussion on how to approach such critique centred on the importance of integrating and highlighting social aspects in e.g. environmental policies, to ensure that policies do not contribute to increased

inequalities. Thus, the results from the group work indicated that SD policy should consider redistribution mechanisms, ensure that tax-reform and regional policies are connected, account for potential displacements in the job market and assess potential impacts to guarantee that policies are just and fair. By making SD policies more aligned with social aspects and consider potential differences in impact on e.g. rural or urban regions, this can further be a counter-measure to the above discussed triggers of increased inequalities and growing discrepancies between urban and rural populations.

Furthermore, a part of the debate regarded the questioning of accountability and credibility of SD and climate policies. Here, the counter-measures proposed by the group work focused on the importance of bringing SD and climate change on the political agenda and ensuring cross-party consensus (valence), while doing away with SD incoherent strategies (e.g. subsidies of polluting energy production, such as coal mining). Moreover, the discussions pointed out that SD should be given more attention in, e.g. social media, and that communication on trade-offs and benefits of SD should be communicated transparently. At the same time, public administration and policymakers should strive for active citizen involvement and participation in the policy-making process by fostering ownership and empowering young people to be part of the process in making a more sustainable society.

Another key take-home message from the Workshop was the **need for a positive reframing of sustainable development that contains an optimistic vision and storylines** of e.g. “the good life in 2050”. This would entail scaling down the narrative, moving away from ‘doom and gloom’ scenarios and develop alternative narratives on how the world would look like if it succeeds in meeting the climate goals and implementing the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. These positive scenarios should be characterised by a balance between preservation and modernisation, with consideration for socioeconomic aspects of SD in e.g. rural areas (redistribution scenarios), a focus on the social dimension, dialogues and a positive and inspiring approach for change on collective and individual levels. Hence, the way forward is to address the underlying societal factors contributing to discontent, while, at the same time, developing sustainability narratives that address the critique of being too complex and technocratic, to foster ‘ownership’ and participation and to create inclusive and proactive policies.

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