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Populism: consequences for global sustainable development

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Populism: Consequences for Global Sustainable Development

Summary

Populism is a style of politics that attacks the existing normative consensus within society, making systematic use of marginalisation and bogeyman tactics. Typical marginalisation strategies target minorities within the population and adopt an anti-scientific world view. Restrictions on civil society are one of the consequences of government action dominated by populism.

When it comes to mobilising voters, populists draw upon selected topics which differ according to political camp (left-wing versus right-wing populism) and national context. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify certain patterns of populist expression, such as the practice of contrasting the “people” and their supposed will with an allegedly out-of-touch political “elite”. The values of the population are largely set within the national context, while representatives of the elite are often portrayed as primarily interested in interactions outside of the nation state and thus perceived and characterised as proponents of globalisation.

Populist trends can be seen in Western nations, former Eastern Bloc states and countries in the global South.

Populist movements pose considerable threats to multi-lateral efforts aimed at tackling transnational political challenges. These patterns include:

- Abandonment of efforts to promote integration. Accordingly, the European Union (EU) is considered an “elite project” and emblematic of many of the negative aspects of globalisation.
- Abandonment of multilateral institutions and international trade agreements. This includes withdrawal from international accords (Paris climate agreement, etc.) and international organisations.
- Reinterpretation/rejection of development policy. Development policy is not understood as an original instrument for promoting global sustainable development, but rather reinterpreted as a vehicle for achieving narrow national goals.

The partially transnational nature of populism could present an additional challenge for global sustainable development in future. Efforts by populist streams to cooperate at cross-border level and thus create a form of “meta-populism” have barely succeeded to date, but this could change after the European elections in May 2019.

The current and the expected future significance of populist actors varies from country to country. Even in nations in which populists are not currently in government, the state could introduce budget cuts or reallocate funding to specific development policy topics in an effort to minimise the electoral gains of the populists. This runs the threat of populist approaches becoming effective even in countries where populist parties are not in government.

Defining the term “populism”

This paper addresses two questions: 1) Where and in what form is populism visible? 2) What are the implications of populism for policies of global sustainable development?

The precise definition of populism is disputed, as is the place that it should be assigned within interpretative grids. For our purposes, we define populism as a policy style that intentionally attacks the established normative consensus within society, making particular use in the process of marginalisation and bogeyman tactics. Typical marginalisation strategies target minorities within the population and adopt an anti-scientific world view. Populist parties and streams are usually characterised by a very limited willingness to accept political compromise. Restrictions on civil society and the erosion of the rule of law are two of the visible consequences of government action dominated by populism. When it comes to mobilising voters, populists draw upon selected topics, the chief ones being immigration and globalisation. Populism is thus discussed in many political debates as a threat to established liberal democracies.

Despite the diverse expressions of the phenomenon, similar patterns of manifestation can be identified in many states, one of which is the contrasting of the (common) “people” and their (supposed) will with an “elite” and their behaviour. While the values of the “people” are largely set within the national context, individuals considered to belong to the “elite” are alleged to give special attention to interaction outside of the nation state, as they benefit to a particularly great extent from globalisation. As such, it is claimed that they are positive in their attitude towards globalisation and international and transnational cooperation.

Populism is becoming an increasingly global phenomenon. Expressions of populist policy are found in liberal Western democracies, former Eastern Bloc states and countries in the global South. The electoral gains by several newer parties in a number of countries are based on patterns of populist argumentation.

Populism is not a new phenomenon; there have been several populist waves in the past, with left-wing ones occurring primarily in South America and right-wing ones mainly in North America and Europe. While both wings share commonalities such as anti-elitism/drawing up battle lines against “corrupt elites”, key characteristics of right-wing populism include anti-pluralism and racist attitudes.

Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether drawing a distinction between “right-wing” and “left-wing” political leanings (in Europe and North America) is still an accurate way of politically locating the debates. Current political conflicts, characterised by a political discourse that is determined on the one hand by socio-economic aspects (welfare state, state interventionism, budget financing) and on the other

by cultural elements (integration, immigration, religion), often cut across left-right models (Grande 2018).

Populism can be considered a reflex action in response to (perceived) dysfunctions in political systems, especially in times of crisis, that is, failure or inadequate solutions on the part of established (party) political systems. This does not mean that populism is automatically tied to parties; it can also find expression through (social) movements (i.e. without developed party structures).

The reasons for the emergence of populism are manifold. Numerous people in many countries are disillusioned with existing liberal democracies, which they hold responsible for a range of problems (such as the loss of low-skilled jobs) and for poor prospects. It is often possible to identify a fundamental mistrust of political leaders and political systems.

Populism is frequently associated with the consequences of globalisation. Globalisation is a complex phenomenon, yet populism appears to offer easy answers. One of these relates to the issue of inequality, which is becoming increasingly prominent in many states. In the United States, for instance, many people are observing how certain sectors of the population are becoming enormously wealthy while living conditions for population groups that were already more disadvantaged are getting worse. Typical populist programming in this context places the blame on migrants, who are seen as a competitive threat in terms of jobs, as well as a risk to public safety, culture and value systems.

Potential threats

Growing populist trends pose potential threats to global sustainable development. They can lead in several respects to significant setbacks when it comes to addressing issues of global sustainable development and endanger multilateralism as a whole.

The first relates to the abandonment of efforts to promote integration. For example, the EU is held responsible for negative aspects of globalisation (for instance, for the regional structural problems in Austria, France, Italy, Poland, etc. owing to a decline in economic competitiveness, for income inequality, for fear and uncertainty (as a result, among other things, of professional, social, cultural and economic challenges), and for a loss of identity). The achievements of the EU (internal free movement, social rights, redistribution mechanisms, etc.) are either disputed or not recognised by the populists; the integration steps taken by the EU are interpreted in primarily negative terms (internal free movement results in exploitation of the social security systems of certain countries and a lack of border patrols leads to illegal immigration, etc.).

The second setback is seen at the level of multilateral institutions and international trade: withdrawal from international accords/agreements and international organisations (Box 1) and the resulting weakening of a rule-based international order.

Box 1: Withdrawal by populist governments from multilateral cooperation arrangements (examples)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US announcement of withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement (2017) • US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council and the financing thereof (2018) • US pull-out from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action involving Iran (2018) • US cessation of payments to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2018) • Lack of approval for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2019) on the part of countries such as Hungary, Poland and the US • US and Israeli withdrawal from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the financing thereof (2019) • US and, subsequently, Russian pull-out from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (2019) • UK announcement of withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit) (originally scheduled for 2019)
Source: Authors

Donald Trump made it known even during his election campaign that he intended to leave the World Trade Organization (WTO) and then announced as President that he would disregard its rules. He has made trade wars and protectionism a key feature of his foreign policy. Trump has repeatedly called into question the legitimacy of international organisations. Populist parties in Western Europe are also advocating economic protectionism.

Populism strikes at the foundations of existing agreements on curbing and tackling climate change. There are numerous features of populist policy that are inconsistent with key values of the United Nations and the goals of international organisations (e.g. the World Bank), which are also reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The example of Belgium shows that, when it comes to coalition governments involving populist partners, conflicting viewpoints on global issues can even lead to the breakdown of the coalition if the focus is on non-binding standards only (Box 2).

Box 2: UN migration compact and national implications: Belgium (a case study)
<p>Political controversy within Belgium over a non-binding migration agreement led to the collapse of the Belgian Government, a coalition including populists. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (UN migration compact) promotes the development of global migration policy guidelines. It was ratified by 164 of the UN's 193 member states in Marrakesh on 10 December 2018. A number of states, including Australia, Austria, Hungary, Poland and the United States expressed opposition to the agreement, fearing a loss of sovereignty. Different positions within the Belgian coalition government ultimately led the Flemish nationalist party <i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (N-VA) to dissolve the coalition.</p>
Source: Authors

The third setback concerns the reinterpretation/rejection of development policy: populists call into question the fundamentals of development policy and its tasks. Instead of being seen as an instrument of global sustainable development, development policy is reinterpreted as a vehicle for rewarding or sanctioning behaviour through the use of us-and-them scenarios and thus for controlling migration from the global South. This threatens the policy area being fundamentally realigned based on supposed national interests. Drastic cuts in development funding are a typical item on the list of populist demands.

Efforts by populist streams to cooperate at cross-border level and thus create a form of "meta-populism" have barely succeeded to date, as seen for example in the failed attempts by Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders to form a populist bloc in the European Parliament in 2014. A transnational "people" is far more difficult to bring together and requires a stronger structure than at national level. Established transnational parties are also keen to distance themselves from populists. Take the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament, for instance, which felt it had no choice but to suspend the membership of Hungarian right-wing party Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Viktor Orbán).

Dealing with populism

The latest analyses indicate that not all countries are affected to the same extent by populism. Similarly, assessments of the future relevance of populist actors differ depending on the country in question.

In Germany, populism has become increasingly significant in recent years. Alternative for Germany (AfD) has held seats in the German Bundestag since 2017, the first right-wing populist party to do so for a long time. The AfD has considerable support. The 2018 "Populism Barometer" for Germany showed that 30.4 per cent of eligible voters felt an affinity with populist movements.

Even if – as in Germany – it is highly unlikely that we will see populist parties in a coalition government in the next few years, their activities could still have an impact on policy-making and thus run the risk of bringing about a shift away from current policy approaches geared to sustainability. Efforts on the part of established parties to use populist policies to take the wind out of the populist parties' sails could lead to changes in spending priorities, which might have a detrimental effect on global commitments.

While states with strong populist outlooks can slow down global sustainable development, countries less affected by such outlooks could take on key roles. This includes making up for reductions in services for global sustainable development. For instance, Germany is currently in the process of expanding its activities in the area of global health and taking on a leading role in more than just financial terms. The Federal Republic now invests some EUR 850 million a year in global health assistance, twice as much as it did ten

years ago. This could help to compensate to some extent for the decrease in activities on the part of the United States.

Prospects

There have been very few analyses to date on the topic of populism in relation to issues of global sustainability. Key gaps in research include

- the focus placed by existing studies on certain liberal Western democracies. There is a particular lack of analysis for Africa and large parts of Asia. Comparative analyses of populism are necessary at interregional and intraregional level.
- concepts of populism for issues of global sustainable development. What do the policy drafts of populist parties look like in this field? How do patterns of populist argumentation impact upon other actors?

It is evident that individual expressions of populism take different positions on different issues of global sustainable development. While Germany's AfD denies climate change, Hungary's governing Fidesz party and Finland's Finns Party recognise the phenomenon and

actively support climate change mitigation measures, all in the interests of "homeland security".

Unlike the AfD in Germany, France's yellow-vest movement does not reject migrants from the global South. Consequently, there is a need for those conducting comparative research into populism to use other grids of analysis to facilitate clearer evaluation. This is crucial when it comes to providing policy advisory services.

While populist trends carry implicit risks, this does not mean that implementation of the 2030 Agenda is set to fail. After all, it is possible to observe the near simultaneous growth of (counter-)movements for greater sustainable development (sub-national actors in the United States, global protest movements by school students, etc.). We can view such movements as an opportunity to keep on promoting implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris climate agreement, despite trends to the contrary. The planned Alliance for Multilateralism, another relevant initiative, sees Germany and France looking to work with Canada and Japan to strengthen international institutions, especially the United Nations. Initiatives of this nature help to underscore the value that multilateral action adds to global sustainable development and to create a counterbalance to populism.

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