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Populists in the Parliaments: a comparative analysis of populist parliamentary behaviour concerning European Integration

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Abstract

The subject of my article is the populist political discourse about European integration within the parliamentary Committees of the Member States. The member states on which I have conducted my analysis are Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands. As selection criterion, I used Arend Lijphart's classification that puts them in the category of consociational democracies. The period of analysis of the speeches includes the end of the last legislatures and the beginning of the current ones. The parties that I have analysed are the 5 Star Movement and the League in Italy, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Dutch Party for Freedom. In detail, I dealt with the parliamentarians of the Committees relevant to the European themes and the members of governments based on a coalition of populist parties who were summoned in the Committees. The positions of parliamentarians were inquired on the following topics: deepening of European integration in economic and social issues, enlargement, defence, and immigration. The sources of the article are the stenographic reports of the parliamentary committees present on the institutional sites of the parliaments. The present work demonstrates the complexity of the European integration discourse and the contradictions present in the single parties and coalitions, the diversity of approaches between the forces of the different states, and the weight of national interests on populists' political claims.

Keywords

European integration, Populism, Euroscepticism, Values, Interests

Introduction and methodology

In this article, I have analysed the political behaviour of populist members of three National Parliaments, to understand their attitude to the process of European integration and see if there are relevant differences between forces of different countries or inside the same group over time. I have considered cases belonging to similar political systems, in order to eliminate biases coming from the differences among the countries. Starting from the categorisation of Arend Lijphart, who draws a distinction between Westminster and consensus democracies, I am dealing with the latter. (Lijphart 2012). The presence of coalition cabinets as well as multiparty system bolster populist anti-establishment movements. The relationship between party system and populism has been analysed by Kitschelt (Kitschelt 2002). I have analysed the cases of Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands, whose populist parties are the Italian League (LN) and Five Star Movement (M5S), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). The opinion of those parties has been assessed in these relevant issues: the enlargement of the EU, the deepening of European economic and monetary institutions, immigration, the creation of a social union, and defence.

The cases are necessarily collocated after the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, that heavily affected the economic condition of European citizens. According to Taggart, "Populism is a reaction to a sense of extreme crisis" (Taggart 2004). As mentioned by Anduiza and Rico, "even if economic hardship is clearly not a necessary or even a sufficient condition for the emergence of populism, populist attitudes may arguably be nourished by economic crisis" (Anduiza e Rico 2017). I have focused on the debates occurred after the publication of some important initiatives to strengthen the European Union. In particular, the document of the European Commission for "delivering a Europe that protects, empowers and defend" (European Commission 2016). These proposals helped the populist parties to find arguments against pro-EU forces and in favour of restoring a fully-fledged national sovereignty. I will thus use every relevant document available until the time of the preparation of this work (October 2018). The most useful material comes from parliamentary Committees because parliamentarians are there more encouraged to explain their visions, far from common political communication and journalistic opinions.

The Italian Parliament

The Italian Parliament experienced an outstanding change in its composition between the two last parliamentary terms – 2013-2018 and 2018-present. As a matter of fact, in the House of Representatives the number of Northern League passed from 22/630 (Camera dei Deputati, XVII Legislatura 2013) to 125/630 (Camera dei Deputati 2018), while the members of the Five Star Movement sharply rose from 88/630 to 221/630. Therefore, the percentage of populist members in the House passed from 17,5% of its members to 54,9%. In the Senate, which has a slightly different electoral law, League members passed from 17/315 (Senato della Repubblica, XVII Legislatura 2013) to 58/315 (Senato della Repubblica 2018), while M5S seats rose from 54/315 to 109/315. The overall populist quota shifted from 28,1% to 53,0%. The changes occurred in the general assembly were reflected into the composition of the

committees proportionally. After the elections, the two populist parties formed a coalition to support the Conte cabinet, therefore populists passed from the opposition to the majority.

Enlargement

One of the main issues concerning European integration is the EU widening, in opposition to the deepening of the current European institutions within existing member States. For instance, the French President Emmanuel Macron argued that enlargement initiatives can constrain the process of institutional integration, and therefore he opposed the admission of Balkan countries to the EU (Tregoures 2018). The Italian Parliament too discussed the topic of EU enlargement, in occasion of the audition of the Foreign Affairs Minister Enzo Moavero. The Minister informed the committees of Foreign Affairs and European Policies of both the House of Representatives and the Senate about the outcome of the European Council of June 2018 (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018). In his speech, Moavero told that in the Balkans

“Italy could find future allies, and therefore it should proceed the faster the better. By contrast, other countries put on the table the well-known question of deepening the existing institutions before any further enlargement. That issue was more justified in the past rather than now. We support a rapid opening of new accession negotiations and a rapid resolution of the incumbent ones” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 4).

After the report, Pino Cabras (M5S) addressed the issue of group dynamics in the European Council.

“Over the last years many debates in European Councils are conditioned by group dynamics. By admitting Balkan states, Italy could find new ways to strengthen its bargaining power in European negotiations. Therefore, Balkans are an area of much interest to Italy for secular historical matters” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 10).

The Senator was worried about conflicting interests with Russia and asked if there could be a way to counterbalance this initiative. I believe that in this case the Senator lacks a European vision and considers the European Council as an arena to strengthen national interests. Widening is therefore acceptable only insofar as it reinforces the Italian position in the European theatre.

The members of the House of Representatives committees on Foreign Affairs and European Policies discussed enlargement policies again in July in occasion of the communication of the European Commission (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018). The rapporteur for the Committee for Foreign Affairs Sabrina de Carlo (M5S) stated that

“a political evaluation of the enlargement policy must move in two convergent directions: on the one hand, the progress of the adjustment process by the concerned countries, on the other hand, the feasibility of a Europe with 33 states. [...] Enlargement must be finalized with accurate socio-political and economic objectives so that the current non-sharing of values and responsibilities within the EU is avoided in the future by strengthening European democratic institutions, starting with the European Parliament” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 32).

That was the last personal statement about enlargement by a member of the III and XIV committees. We therefore notice the lack of a common position about enlargement policies and their implications on the process of European Integration. However, Populist representatives also lack a strong commitment to support European Integration, because they mainly focus on the Italian perspective, even though they are not openly opposed to enlargement.

The strengthening of European economic institutions

The legitimation and the change of economic institutions is one of the crucial points of European Integration. One of the most important initiatives is the completion of the Banking Union, because, “together with the Capital Markets Union, a complete Banking Union will promote a stable and integrated financial system in the European Union” (European Commission 2017). The Italian Parliament had several opportunities to discuss these issues, so I will take into consideration the most important and recent of them, in order to understand the opinion of Italian populists on these topics.

In 2017 several committees of the Italian House of Representatives discussed the third annual Work Programme of the European Commission: “Delivering a Europe that protects, empowers and defends” (European Commission 2016). The discussion of this communication was an occasion for the parliamentarians to discuss about the process of European Integration. One of the components of the VI Committee on Finance, M5S Daniele Pesco asked the government to question the very reasons of the process of European Integration, since European acts often undermined Italian constitutional principles (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 149). Turning to the completion of the Banking Union, Pesco

“considered it a priority for European governments to review the overall framework of Banking Union, rather than to continue its completion and reinforcement through the European Deposit Insurance Scheme. In particular this mechanism could also lead to disadvantages for the country, given that the mechanisms and conditions to obtain access to the Resolution Fund are not clear, so do the future required commitments for Italy” (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 150).

This statement against EDIS is interesting because it contradicts the main economist benchmark for populist forces, Stiglitz, who stated that “without a common deposit insurance fund, money will flow from the banking system of “weak” countries to the banks in strong countries, weakening further those already having problems” (Stiglitz 2016, 241).

After Pesco, two others M5S members delivered their opinion. First, Carlo Sibilgia was afraid of the loss of importance of the Italian Parliament. In a quite convoluted reasoning about two-speed Europe, he feared “that the observations contained in the draft opinion risk to be reduced to mere declarations of intent, without any repercussions on the action of the Executive, thus debasing the role of Parliament in relation to the European acts” (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 151). Second, Girolamo Pisano alleged that the Minister of Economic Affairs Padoa-Schioppa “was in favour of strengthening the European constraints, leading to a further limitation of the national sovereignty”, and that being part of the inner core of a two-speed Europe is a marker of a totally submissive government to European policies. Moreover, Pisano stated that

“the monetary and fiscal policy instruments established by the European Union –in homogeneous terms for all areas of the Union – have proved unsuccessful and should no longer be implemented. It is necessary to tackle with economic and fiscal measures the strong disparities that characterize the industrial and economic development. This could compensate the disparities between the different countries of the euro area” (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 151).

Even if these statements radically criticised the position of the Italian Government, the majority of the components of the VI Committee backed the text, and therefore the communication of the Commission was received positively. In this debate, the two representatives of the Northern League in the Committee did not intervene.

In the 2018-present parliamentary term, the members had the opportunity to discuss about the evolution of European institutions in occasion of the hearing of the Minister for European Policies Paolo Savona in July 2018. The Minister was received by the XIV Committee on European Policies of both House and Senate to communicate the political guidelines of his Ministry (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018). The Minister delivered a complete speech on the European vision of his Ministry, starting from the necessity to change the economic institutions and procedures.

“In the absence of timely and effective powers of contrast from the ECB, to avoid that the only announcement of spending can be reflected on the BTP-Bund spread, the ideal would be for the European Union to ask Member States to make investment policies limited in time and size. We are living below the resources because of the European constraints: therefore, either we touch the former or we intervene on the latter. For now, let's touch the first ones, namely expenses and investments” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 6).

After this critic to the dominant economic paradigm, the Minister turned to the perspective of a Political Union.

“The ideal is to move towards a Political Union where European citizens have equal rights and duties. To avoid that this objective continues to move away, it is urgent to set up European schools at all levels” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 7).

Savona thus asked to create a European school in order to shape a common European identity. However, this statement presents a contradiction: the outcomes of this proposal will appear in the next generations, while the reforms of the economic institutions are required now.

Then, the Minister turned to economic institutions. First, he addressed the issue of the statute of the ECB.

“It is necessary to provide the European Central Bank with a statute similar to that of the main central banks of the world, where the objectives of stability and growth are integrated, and the instruments are the widest possible suggested by the doctrine and tested in practice, and can be exercised in full autonomy” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 7).

Then, he called for the completion of the internal market. He finally argued that the MFF should have more funds and European own resources should be increased to tackle migration and security effectively, as well as to fully implement the Common Agricultural Policy. In conclusion, he put the choice to proceed toward a more integrated EU in the hands of European decision makers or the peoples.

“We need a more aggressive policy, or at least to ask for it. If they do not give it to us, then the buck will pass back into the hands of Parliament and the people. To be honest, I will never take any alternative position because I am a technician. You are the representatives of the people. If Europe refuses, maybe you will be faced with this dramatic choice. You have to decide what to do” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 11).

The whole speech sounds like a situation of deadlock: some reforms are mandatory, but if they are not fulfilled, peoples will opt for disintegration. This reasoning is structured like the one in the aforementioned book of Stiglitz, in

which the author called for a creation of a “flexible euro” or a divorce if institutional reforms are not completed (Stiglitz 2016, 272). Even the position of the Minister is ambiguous, since he presents himself as a technician who avoids the responsibility to decide about the future of the EU. The only member who openly opposed the perspective of federalism was Fazzolari, who belongs to the extreme right nationalist party “Brothers of Italy”. He stated that the model of European Union for the right parties was a confederation rather than a federation. He also added that

“more people have argued that in the current European system a single currency in inhomogeneous economies and with different taxes does not work; so, either Europe changes or Italy exits from the euro. I hope this will continue to be the Government's approach” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 14).

This statement clearly confirms the situation of deadlock depicted by the Minister. The following statements by M5S and League members however did not directly mention an anti-federalist position. An extremely interesting statement came from Maggioni (LN)

“In your speech, you spoke of the need to have democratic legitimacy. I think that, as I have heard today, you not only have democratic legitimacy, but also the popular legitimacy” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 18).

By separating democratic legitimacy and popular legitimacy, Maggioni is authentically populist, insofar as it differentiates the democratic institutions and the people. Popular legitimation therefore further strengthens the position of the Minister and it appears that in case of failure of the required reforms, it could give the Italian populist Government the power to lead the Country outside of the European Union. In my opinion, this is the crucial point of the populist anti-European action inside the institutions. This stream was also indirectly followed by his colleague in the LN party, Bonfrisco.

“So far, we have only witnessed the development of monetary policies and not of the economic ones; having an ECB that does not have the characteristics of lender of last resort, like all the central banks that issue money, entails leaving all the possible space to speculation. This will happen until we will have a common school, a common labour agency, a European rating agency” (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 21).

In Bonfrisco's vision, Europe needs common schools and other institutions which are not on the reforming agenda of both the European Commission and Governments. As a matter of fact, the conclusion of the key European Council of June 2018 never mentions the creation of a common school, a labour agency or a European rating agency (European Council 2018), neither does Juncker's 2018 State of the Union Speech (Juncker 2018). Therefore, these proposals look like a way to address other proposals instead of the consolidated ones.

It is difficult to find a common political vision between populists, even within the same party. An element of continuity is the criticism on the current European framework. However, it is not clear which path populists are intentioned to follow, whether to embrace stronger integration or to cause disintegration in order to recover parts of national sovereignty.

Defence and security

Another important debate on the future of the European Union is European defence. The integration of European defence experienced an important improvement with the approval of the PESCO, aimed at “enhancing the EU's capacity as an international security actor, contributing to the protection of EU citizens and maximising the effectiveness of defence spending” (European External Action Service 2018). Therefore, along with economic institutions, defence is the main field of the process of European Integration. I will start the analysis of the Italian Parliament discussions about defence considering again the third annual Work Programme of the European Commission. In this part I will focus on the IV Committee of Defence of the House of Representatives. In this committee, Luca Brusone told that in this field Europe should avoid the mistake of the common currency, i.e. to introduce it without a previous harmonisation of the national fiscal policies. He added that

“The European Defence Action Plan could be shared, in principle, if its direction was clear. For example, the Plan provides for the funding of research projects of common European interest, but to protect the European defence industry, it is necessary to avoid purchasing non-European systems of weapons and technologies, as is the case with F-35 aircraft” (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 63).

Therefore, the M5S group not only agrees in principle with the idea of European integration in the field of defence, but also takes the opportunity to contrast national policies such as the purchase of F-35 units. The group then presented an alternative proposal for the conclusions of the committee, in which it figured more autonomy from the NATO and to increase cooperation among member states (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 64-66).

In September 2017 the same Committee discussed the establishment of the European Defence Fund and some measures to make the European defence industry more competitive. In this meeting, M5S Davide Crippa delivered a

brief speech similar to the one of Brusone, asking to summon the Minister for Economic Development Carlo Calenda to speak about the STX-Fincantieri affair (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2017, 14). Therefore, the focus of the intervention is national events and no opposition is shown for European Integration.

Turning to the second parliamentary term, in the first meetings about defence on July, the members only discussed the European communications and approved the documents without debating. For instance, the only concern about the European plan on military mobility – provided that the plan does not interfere with national sovereignty – was to adopt the required national legislation to avoid infringement proceedings by the European Commission (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2018).

In August, the XIV Committee discussed again the proposal of regulation to create the European Defence Fund (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2018). The conclusions adopted by the Committee are just technical specifications, however the Committee asked to communicate the results produced by the European Fund to Member States and national Parliaments for an appropriate level of democratic scrutiny” (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2018, 57-58).

Finally, considering a discussion on military mobility in September, in the *considerata*, it is important to underline one specific point: “it is therefore important to adopt measures to improve military mobility, while fully respecting the sovereignty of the Member States and in accordance with the Treaties and European Union legislation” (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2018, 88). Moreover, in the observations the Committee continuously underlines the role of Member States (Atti Parlamentari, Camera 2018, 89). We find therefore a considerable presence of the term “sovereignty”, as well as the request to respect national prerogatives. This point does not clash directly with European Integration, even if the main concern of the populist parliamentarians is to respect national sovereignty rather than to build European Institutions. However, in this parliamentary term, final documents are different from the ones of 2013-2018 because of this attention to national sovereignty.

The Austrian Parliament

The Austrian Parliament is composed by two chambers like the Italian one: the Nationalrat and the Bundesrat. In my analysis I will take into consideration only the Nationalrat, since in which most of the discussions and decisions are taken. The amount of elected populist members (FPÖ) passed from 40 in 2013 (IFES Election Guide 2013) to 51 in 2017 (Austrian Parliament 2018), with a percentual increase of seats from 21,9% to 27,9%. For this analysis, I will rely on five stenographic reports of the main Committee and the permanent Subcommittee of European Affairs in the Nationalrat. After the elections, on December 2017, FPÖ and ÖVP (the Austrian Popular Party) formed a coalition to back a cabinet lead by Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) and Austrian populists passed from the opposition to the majority. Moreover, Austria has been the President of the Council of the European Union from July 2018.

Social union

The establishment of the so-called “social union” is relevant because it implies a cession of sovereignty from the Member States to the EU concerning labour policies and requires a sharing of social costs between the countries. For these reasons, this kind of integration has always been resisted by populist eurosceptical parties, especially from Northern Europe.

In February 2018, in the main Committee of European Affairs, Dagmar Belakowitsch (FPÖ) strongly criticized this measure as a one-way development, and Chancellor Kern (SPÖ) to point to the Posting of Workers Directive. Belakowitsch believed that a social union cannot be financed, so States should act much more nationally to make up for the differences (Austrian Parliament 2017). We can thus find a direct effort to constrain the Europeanisation of certain policies in a phase in which FPÖ is still at the opposition.

In March, after the establishment of the coalition government by ÖVP and FPÖ, Sebastian Kurz delivered his first speeches as Chancellor on European Union topics. With EU Minister Gernot Blümel he confirmed that the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union would stand under the motto “a Europe that protects”. Subsidiarity would play the central role. The EU should not become more bureaucratic, but stronger where it is needed for better protection. The current over-regulation simply had no added value, Blümel said. Above all, Social Democrats wanted to put pressure on wage and social dumping, which was still at the top of the agenda in Europe, since Austria is particularly affected by them. The SPÖ advocated that the raising of social standards in the EU should be the focus of the Austrian Presidency of the Council and supported the establishment of a European workplace safety authority. These proposals received only support from the minority and were thus ignored by the majority supported by FPÖ (Austrian Parliament 2018).

In June, another proposal by the SPÖ aimed at making raising social standards in the EU a priority for the Austrian Presidency and at performing an effective contribution to combating wage and social dumping. Jörg Leichtfried called on the Federal Government to support the rapid adoption of the Social Justice Package in the Council and the

establishment of a European Industrial Safety Authority based in Austria. Leichtfried criticized the existing Posting of Workers Directive as insufficient to prevent wage and social dumping. This initiative was also rejected by other groups, including FPÖ. EU Minister Blümel commented that there could be no approval for the Occupational Safety Authority as long as the concrete added value was not apparent (Austrian Parliament 2018). In the field of Social union, the Austrian government managed to block any initiative coming from the opposition. In my opinion this behaviour derives from both the populist and the conservative attitude of the Austrian governing coalition. The purpose of the government was therefore to promote other aspects of the EU budget and to constrain the process of Europeanisation of traditionally national policies.

Defence and security

The issue of Defence was addressed mainly in the meetings of February by both the Committee and the Subcommittee. The creation of the PESCO was welcomed by both Kern and Kurz. The Chancellor said that Austria would participate in the cooperation, as far as neutrality permits it, and emphasized the civilian nature of the Austrian contribution, for example civilian protection and cybersecurity. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Kurz was pleased with the clear progress towards a closer cooperation, because no country can handle these complex tasks alone. Of course, PESCO did not imply a common European army under one command, as Kurz explained to Claudia Gamon (NEOS). She supported PESCO as a first step towards a common defence policy and stated in her view that such intensified cooperation makes sense only if a European army and a common defence policy is established in the long term. On behalf of the FPÖ, Reinhard-Eugen Bösch said that a common defence policy was already part of the EU treaties. In his opinion, PESCO was a political signal for the EU's self-confidence vis-à-vis the United States. The silent scepticism of Bösch was based primarily on the fact that many EU member states are also members of NATO and therefore rely less on the EU than on transatlantic cooperation. He also said that PESCO was not just about civil issues, but also to competence centres or transnational military transports. In any case, Member States would have to increase their defence budgets, which would also strengthen the Austrian army (Austrian Parliament 2017).

The theme was also discussed in the Subcommittee. Bösch summarized the position of his party: "We want less union, but where it is important, it should be more efficient". He therefore welcomed the strengthening of cooperation in defence and foreign affairs through PESCO. The Minister agreed with this and underlined that Austria would be committed to civil protection and training centres, above all with regard to its neutrality, as he also declared in the debate in the Committee (Austrian Parliament 2018). Considering defence, populists stressed their attention to realistic considerations: Europe should integrate its defence only to respond to real challenges and without ignoring practical considerations of international order. Realism is a common *topos* in populists' speeches. For instance, the Dutch Marcel De Graaf, co-chair of the eurosceptical ENF group (Europe of Nations and Freedom), welcomed the presence of President Kurz at the plenary meeting of the EP in July 2018 as a victory of realism over dreams (European Parliament 2018).

Enlargement

The enlargement process was debated mainly in the last three meetings of the Committee. In March, the government stated that enlargement is also a matter of stability in the neighbourhood - an essential aspect for the security of Europe. If things are going well in the Western Balkans, that would be good for Europe too (Austrian Parliament 2018).

In May, the EU main Committee meeting was held in advance of the informal Council in Sofia on May 17, which would address the EU for the pre-accession of the countries of South-Eastern Europe, i.e. the States of the Western Balkans. The Chancellor stated that Austria would support these countries and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Karin Kneissl would use her presidency to further deepen the cooperation with these countries, said Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl. This line was supported also explicitly by Reinhold Lopatka (ÖVP), Andreas Schieder (SPÖ), Claudia Gamon (NEOS) and Alma Zadić (PILZ). With deputy Zadić, the Chancellor agreed that it was necessary to help and accompany the countries of South-eastern Europe on their way to the EU, otherwise the influence of other states would become stronger. The NEOS also brought in an application for an opinion, which, however, was only supported by the list PILZ and thus remained in the minority. Claudia Gamon wanted to bind the Chancellor in his negotiations at EU level to fully commit to the common foreign and security policy and the Western Balkans strategy presented by the EU Commission. Austria should continue to recognize without restriction both the independence of Kosovo and the territorial integrity of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Gamon said in her motion. She also called on the Federal Chancellor to distance himself clearly from the statements of the Austrian Vice Chancellor regarding the territorial integrity of Bosnia, the independence of Kosovo and the allegations against George Soros (Austrian Parliament 2018). In this episode we thus experience a contrast between a non-populist representative and one member of the government. The aim of the parliamentarian was to pour cold water on the populist propaganda outside the institutions, by binding the actions of the government far from the public opinion. In June, however, the opposition accused the government to act differently than talking (Austrian Parliament 2018).

The strengthening of European economic institutions

In the Subcommittee in late May, Minister of Finance Hartwig Löger affirmed that the goal of the Federal Government was to finally bring the topic of Financial Transactions Tax to a meaningful solution. There is currently no clear basis for what should now be included in the tax base, noted the Minister of Finance with regret. The current discussions would rather tend to "crumble" a meaningful basis for the FTT. Löger himself advocated the broadest possible basis for assessment. He remarked that, of course, Austria would take on a mediation role on this issue during the Council Presidency, but this does not prevent them from defending their own positions. Concerning the size of the EU budget after Brexit, before discussing an increase, for the Minister it was important to clarify priorities while minimizing inefficiencies. The Finance Minister was supported by the parliamentarians ÖVP and FPÖ. Löger emphasized that he rejected legal integration on an EU-legal basis and would call into question the role of national parliaments. However, reporting obligations to the EU Parliament were foreseen. Austria was in favour of continuing to secure the multinational decision by national parliaments, and this was noted with satisfaction by his colleagues. Doris Margreiter (SPÖ) too campaigned for the right of national parliaments, whereupon Finance Minister Löger said that the exclusion of national parliaments would be a disaster. The Minister however confirmed that the EMF was excellently suited to stabilizing the Union, but he rejected any real transfer union. Finally, on behalf of the FPÖ, Robert Lugar warned against an automatism on the solidarity of all member states (Austrian Parliament 2018).

In the meeting of the Committee in June, Blümel stated that Austria would also work to close tax loopholes and promote the digital tax, in order to ensure equal competition. Austria would therefore do everything to approve a 3% taxation of Internet giants, as proposed by the European Commission and as emphasized by both Chancellor Kurz and Blümel. However, both underlined the importance of completing the digital single market in order to maintain competitiveness. Finally, Kurz considered the introduction of the FTT useful only at European level (Austrian Parliament 2018).

In those two meetings, FPÖ parliamentarians showed once again a realistic attitude to European Integration. The role of National Parliaments must be maintained, while European institutions are useful only insofar as they pursue national interests and values. This general opinion, in the Austrian case, is shared by both the majority and the opposition.

The Dutch Parliament

For the Dutch Parliament, I will take into consideration only the low chamber, the Tweede Kamer, because it is the most important in the political system. In the Netherlands populists are represented by the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV), led by Geert Wilders. The number of PVV seats passed from 15 in September 2012 (Riviera 2012) to 20 in April 2017 (Tweede Kamer 2017), with a percentual shift from 10,1% to 13,1%. The Netherlands are the only case in this analysis in which populist parties remained at the opposition after the last elections. The analysis on the debate about the EU is conducted using the reports of the European Affairs Committee. In this Committee, the main speaker for the PVV group is Vicky Maeijer, a former member of the European Parliament.

Enlargement

The Tweede Kamer debated the issue of EU enlargement in July 2018, after the informal General Affairs Council on western Balkans of May 17 (Tweede Kamer 2018). The position of the PVV group was carried by Vicky Maeijer. First, she expressed disappointment for the lack of clarity of the Dutch Prime Minister in the European Council about his position on Balkans enlargement. Then, she stated:

“the PVV basically says no to further enlargement of the European Union to any country. The expansion mission of Brussels must come to an end, because we already have enough problems.” (Tweede Kamer 2018, 10).

This position was shared by the Social Democrats, whose party stands at the opposition like the PVV. Jasper van Dijk (SD) argued that the enlargement proposals were inspired by geopolitical purposes rather than the real economic situation of the Balkan countries (Tweede Kamer 2018, 10). Even the ruling Christian Union and D66 stated that those countries need to implement reforms on rule of law and human rights before a complete accession (Tweede Kamer 2018, 14-15). The VVD was the only party to oppose enlargement even when those countries will meet the requirements.

We thus find a different position from both the Italian and Austrian case. On one hand, the Italian Foreign Minister called for the enlargement to achieve new allies in European institutions, while the proactive role of Austria was determined by the institutional role of the Presidency. On the other, Dutch populists stated that the Commission should stop every enlargement initiative, in order to avoid problems for the existing Member States. I believe that the

difference of these positions derives from the differences of national interests of the three countries and not by the specific idea of Europe of the populist parties.

The strengthening of European economic institutions

One of the peculiarities of the Dutch Parliament is that in the European Affairs Committee the speeches opposing European Integration are not delivered mainly by the populist party. In fact, the PVV focused its eurosceptical stances to attack EU migration policies, and to call for a recover of sovereignty to better protect national borders against a pretended invasion. By contrast, the opposition to the proposals to reform of the Euro Area came from other parties, like the Christian Democratic Appeal. For instance, Omtzigt (CDA) in the European Affairs Committee after the Euro Summit of June 2018 told that:

“It is good that nothing was agreed on the euro zone budget at the Euro Summit, but why has it been agreed to continue the discussion at the next meeting? We did not want that euro zone budget” (Tweede Kamer 2018, 19).

In July 2017, the European Affairs Committee discussed the outcome of the General Affairs Council of May, and Maeijer asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs Koenders some crucial questions. First, she complained that after Brexit the discussion on European integration continued without a reflection on the idea of the EU project, and then criticised the presence of proposals from both the European Commission and the Franco-German axis. She thus asked the position of the Minister about the Dutch position on these proposals, fearing that the most important decisions had already been taken. Then, she literally asked: “what does the Minister intend to do to prevent us from becoming a superstate?” (Tweede Kamer 2017, 5).

In the same month, the Committee discussed the adoption of the MFF. In that meeting, Maeijer expressed supported the idea of Nexit and backed the use of veto power:

“The Netherlands has been the biggest net contributor for years. The PVV is in favour of a Nexit, but since the Netherlands is still a member of the European Union, we have to be tough. The Netherlands has a veto with the long-term budget. I call on the Minister to use this. [...] We are against fun projects and want to cut civil service and salaries. Get rid of all the agencies and no new own resources. [...] The Dutch interest is absolutely not served by a money-wasting European Union that uses our tax money for its dream of an EU superstate.” (Tweede Kamer 2017, 5).

The other event in which Maeijer discussed her party’s opinion on Europe was the meeting of the European Affairs Committee after Juncker’s State of the Union speech of 2018. First and foremost, she criticised the integrationist stances proposed in times of crisis, like the idea of creating a European Finance Minister and to remove the veto of Member States in foreign policy. She argued that promoting more Europe as a unique remedy is not correct (Tweede Kamer 2018, 11). Then, she openly called for an exit of the Netherlands from the EU. It seems that Maeijer refuses to discuss the specific reform proposals because her party opposes any kind of European Union, even a reformed one. It is thus difficult to understand how PVV wants to hinder the process of European integration, apart from simply calling for Nexit and blocking any new resource for EU institutions (Tweede Kamer 2018, 12).

Immigration

Immigration is one of the most important themes in the populist speeches, especially in countries of first entry like Italy. However, in the Italian populist speech, anti-immigration does not imply euroscepticism, and even Minister Moavero welcomed any European initiative to control immigration fluxes (Atti Parlamentari, Senato 2018, 4). Also theoretical and statistical studies demonstrate that citizens are likely to blame national governments rather than the EU concerning the immigration crisis (Harteveld, et al. 2018, 174) (Wilson e Hobolt 2015) (Hobolt e Tilley 2017). For these reasons, I decided not to take into consideration the discussions about immigration in the Parliaments of both Italy and Austria. However, the Dutch populist parliamentary speeches clearly show that xenophobia is one of the most direct causes of euroscepticism within the party. As a matter of fact, from the ideological point of view, Wilders imagined the political action of his party as “a strong resistance against immigration and supranational co-operation because both would threaten national identity” (Vossen 2011).

During the discussion of the General Affairs Committee in 2017, Maeijer blamed the Dutch government to follow the European solutions on immigration and not to pretend the restore of national borders.

“In recent months, 60,000 immigrants have arrived in Italy. [...] Despite all this, the Netherlands continues to rally behind the European agreements, while it is Brussels that facilitates this asylum tsunami, has shown a terrorist a prize and allows terrorists to move freely in the European Union” (Tweede Kamer 2017, 5).

In the following debate, she repeated that “more Europe” is not the best solution to resolve the problem of immigration, as Minister Koenders (PvdA) mentioned, but the government should ask for more sovereignty to protect its borders (Tweede Kamer 2017, 20).

Another interesting debate is the one that followed the European Council of late June 2018. This time, the position of the PVV group was delivered by Sietse Fritsma.

“Last week it became clear that the EU migration policy has finally failed, which means that the entire EU has failed. The same applies to our government, which is completely dependent on it. Now that the EU is not resolving anything, and no result has been achieved, individual European countries are taking matters into their own hands. We are taking back the immigration policy and the border control of the EU.” (Tweede Kamer 2018, 4).

This attack on the EU misfunctions has to be linked with the critic on EU expenses, like the one carried out by Maeijer in the State of the Union debate (Tweede Kamer 2018, 12). The PVV definitely looks at the EU as a non-functioning framework of institutions expensive to sustain. However, any proposal to reform this kind of institutions is opposed from the beginning and alleged as an attempt to create a European superstate.

Conclusions

This analysis shows that there are several differences between Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands. First and foremost, this article inquired the relationship between populism and euroscepticism. On the one hand, it is important to mention that for the members of the Parliaments populism does not always mean euroscepticism. For instance, in the Italian Parliament, Sabrina de Carlo (M5S) called for the strengthening of the European Parliament. However, this position does not imply the acceptance of European integration in every field, as Daniele Pesco showcased for the opposition to the creation of the EDIS. On the other hand, it is important to state that euroscepticism does not always imply populism. I have reported two cases of strong anti-Europeanist positions coming from two non-populist parties: CDA and Brothers of Italy, which opposed respectively a budget for the euro-area and a federalisation of the EU.

Second, this article highlights the difference of national interests concerning specific issues. The clearest case is the process of EU enlargement. Even if the negotiation to the accession is proceeding slowly, Italy backed it to find new allies in the intergovernmental institutions, Austria supported it with a European vision because of its role as President of the Council, while Dutch parties questioned the possibility for Balkan States to join the EU because of their economic situation.

Finally, the analysis of the speeches shows that there are differences in the approach to constrain the process of integration. In Italy, the attempt to block the process of European integration is pursued by the two populist forces, while in Austria this purpose is shared massively by other political forces. In both these cases, however, the opposition is moved to specific points of the EU reforming agenda. In the Netherlands, instead, the PVV attacks the whole process of integration, advocating for Nexit and alleging the EU as one of the worst threats to national sovereignty.

Populist speeches present several differences between each other, and therefore they do not act in the same way in respect of the EU. However, this does not mean that in other arenas, like the European Parliament or intergovernmental institutions, these forces could find common elements to change the EU together.

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Biography

Federico Bonomi, class 1996, is a graduate student in European Politics and Society at the University of Oxford. He graduated *cum laude* at the University of Pavia with a thesis on the reform of the governance of the Euro Area and graduated full marks from the excellence school IUSS. He is also alumnus of College Ghislieri. During his undergraduate career, Federico worked on the lessons of political philosophy and European integration by professor Mario Albertini, and a book will be published soon. He has been representative for the association of Italian excellence schools for more than two years and organised a successful conference series on the EU between ten Italian universities. Federico took part in several international conferences to present his works, like at CEU Budapest, University of Macerata, University of Salento and Catholic University of Murcia. Some of his works have a scheduled publication. Currently, he is receiving a strong training in both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In 2020, he will complete his thesis on the relationship between national sovereignty and European rules concerning budget policies under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Maurer. After finishing the course, he will probably apply for a PhD in European Studies.