

# Between Collaboration and Demarcation

## The European People's Party and the Populist Wave

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Herman Van Rompuy, then President of the European Council, asserted that populism was the “greatest danger for Europe”, words which, in the years to come, would be echoed by much of the establishment both in Brussels and the member states<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, since the aftermath of the latest economic and financial crisis, populism has dominated Europe’s zeitgeist and put the European Union (EU) in a defensive position. In essence, populism has come to encompass a set of diverse trends that have redefined the political and public debate over the European integration process. Despite the exponential rise in the use of this designation, the label, which is increasingly loaded in both political and normative terms, eludes univocal definitions, often preventing a nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon. This lack of understanding certainly applies to political forces such as the European center-right.

In this chapter we will endeavor to explore populism in an unbiased manner, challenging prevailing assumptions on its relationship with contemporary liberal democracy, in order to provide a deeper analysis of the ostensibly contradictory nature of the relationship of the European People’s Party (EPP) with populist forces<sup>2</sup>. In order to clarify the nature of the tensions raised by populism in the EU, a brief review of the extant literature will provide the foundations for a reappraisal of the challenges faced by the EPP and of the strategies that this political family has developed in dealing with a shifting political landscape.

<sup>1</sup> G. LAZARIDIS - G. CAMPANI, *Understanding the Populist Shift*, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> With regard the choice of the party’s name, which referred to *Volksparteien* and not populism, see S. VAN HECKE, *On the Road*, p. 156.

This will be achieved by empirically examining several instances of this relationship in order to capture prevailing patterns and diachronic shifts through an exercise of documentary analysis.

## II. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, EUROPE, THE EPP, AND THE “POPULIST THREAT”

### 1. *Populism and European integration*

As our focus is limited to the context of the EU, it is essential to begin by considering the role played by Euroskepticism with regard to populism in Europe. While the two are often conflated, they are not one and the same: Euroskeptical views are not *per se* a sign of populism. Populism predates the EU, but within the EU, Euroskepticism preceded populism. Initially, however, Euroskepticism referred to the first wave of widespread contestation towards European integration following the Maastricht Treaty (1992) that did not have an anti-elite rhetoric as its focus and tended to be reformist rather than Europhobic in its outlook<sup>3</sup>. In one essential regard, though, the rise of Euroskepticism—and thus of the politicization of the European project—did in fact contribute to the success of populism across the EU: by providing a new public sphere and political arena, in which “Brussels” would constitute the perfect archetype of an illegitimate, incompetent, and ultimately dispensable elite<sup>4</sup>. Such a strategy thus only gained traction fairly recently, owing its success to the financial and economic crisis of 2008/09, which would lead to the Greek government-debt crisis of 2010. As the Commission and the European Central Bank consolidated their role, alongside the International Monetary Fund, in imposing fiscal consolidation and debt repayment, Euroskepticism and populism clearly turned into mutually reinforcing phenomena<sup>5</sup>.

Whether populism is understood as an ideology, a discursive style, or a mobilization strategy, there is a consensus with regard to how “[all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to ‘the people’ and all are in one sense or another anti-elit-

<sup>3</sup> R. HARSEN, *Concluding Comment*, pp. 333 f.

<sup>4</sup> See D. ALMEIDA, *Europeanized Eurosceptics?*

<sup>5</sup> Y. STAVRAKAKIS, *The Return of ‘the People’*.

ist”, as noted by Margaret Canovan<sup>6</sup>. If one is to view this concept in a neutral manner, it is useful to consider how these two fundamental features also point us towards what populism is not<sup>7</sup>. First, populism is the polar opposite of elitism. Its narrative focuses on reversing the relationship between the people and the political class, claiming to provide a channel for unmediated and thus fully accountable power of the people. These are, in essence, some of the essential tenets of Cas Mudde’s understanding of populism as a “thin-centered” ideology: a mercurial set of ideas which, rather than providing comprehensive answers to political questions, amounts to a combination of incoherent and often contradictory views, all of which stem from a Manichean world-view<sup>8</sup>. Others, not without reason, have sought to nuance this definition by avoiding the dichotomy between populist and non-populist ideologies, highlighting how all political parties may, to differing degrees, demonstrate a populist communicative style. Deegan-Krause and Haughton identify six “populist claims” to gauge the intensity of this trait: (1) homogeneity of the people, (2) homogeneity of the elite, (3) glorification of the people, (4) denigration of the elite, (5) unmediated leadership, and (6) rejection of cooperation or compromise<sup>9</sup>. Below we shall delve into the specific challenges that these developments produced for the EPP.

## 2. *The EPP and the challenges of European democracy*

Within a multi-level polity such as the EU, European political parties provide a unique vantage point when examining developments that arise at the intersection between domestic and supranational politics. For reasons we shall discuss below, the EPP is of particular interest when analyzing the matter of populism in the EU. While populists see institutions, their checks and balances, and procedural democracy in general as obstacles to their aims, the EPP can be defined as elitist in the sense that it holds institutions and representative democracy in

<sup>6</sup> M. CANOVAN, *Populism*, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup> C. MUDDE - C.R. KALTWASSER, *Populism*, p. 494.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 497-499; C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, p. 544.

<sup>9</sup> K. DEEGAN-KRAUSE - T. HAUGHTON, *Toward a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism*, pp. 823 f.

very high regard, thus upholding the need for and the prerogatives of the political class<sup>10</sup>. Its vocally pro-European stance should also be interpreted from such a perspective, which relates to how Euroskepticism has found fertile ground within the populist world-view<sup>11</sup>. In essence, the EPP is the voice of the establishment, which places it in sharp contrast to the ‘iconoclastic’ character of populist movements that seek discontinuity rather than stability. This feature of the EPP, on the other hand, is counter-balanced by its adherence to subsidiarity as an instrument to empower citizens, which translates into its commitment to pluralism, a further dimension that is firmly rooted in its Christian Democratic values<sup>12</sup>. Incidentally, pluralism also constitutes the other ‘non-populism’ to which Canovan’s assertion points us: populism is based upon a monist world-view which denies the heterogeneity of society, either in terms of economic interests or as far as ethnic, cultural, and religious groups are concerned, adding a further dimension to the stark contrast between the EPP and populism<sup>13</sup>.

The relationship between the two is, however, far more complex than may appear, as it reflects the countervailing forces that paradoxically bind populism and liberal democracy to one another. Plattner, among others, has very effectively highlighted how liberal democracy is a regime in tension between the aspirations of majority rule, which is after all the basis of democracy itself, and the protection of individual liberty, which is the aim of pluralism: neither the absolute will of the majority nor the complete disaggregation of society’s interests is possible, thus frustrating both objectives<sup>14</sup>. Populism can thus be interpreted as a corrective to an excessively liberal and pluralistic view of democracy that neglects the grievances of “the majority” which, in times of crisis, are far more likely to mobilize otherwise disengaged and politically inactive sections of society<sup>15</sup>. From this perspective, despite the apparent conflict between the EPP and populism, defining the latter as a potential element of

<sup>10</sup> F. HARTLEB, *After Their Establishment*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> See P. TAGGART, *Populism and Representative Politics*.

<sup>12</sup> European People’s Party, *Manifesto*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> M.F. PLATTNER, *Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy*, pp. 88 f.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83 f.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

democracy itself contributes to understanding how the EPP has come to combine both oppositional and conciliatory stances vis-à-vis populist parties, all while raising more than a few political dilemmas.

### III. MAPPING OUT A DIVERSE SET OF STRATEGIES

#### 1. *The Challenge of European Christian Democracy*

As we have outlined in the foregoing conceptual considerations, the relationship between the EPP and populism is indeed an ostensibly contradictory one, as it recasts a deeper tension that lies at the heart of all liberal democracies. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to examining how the EPP has managed the ebb and flow of conflict and proximity with populism by highlighting different strategies through a historical analysis, complemented whenever possible by our documentary research on the basis of almost one hundred official documents. The documents collected cover in particular the last five years and comprise all those that directly or indirectly address the issue of populism among the available press releases, resolutions, manifestos, and declarations released by the EPP and the EPP Group in the European Parliament, as well as the publications issued by affiliated research foundations (such as the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies as the EPP's official political foundation, and the EPP Group's European Ideas Network). The five main strategies that will be considered are: "indifference", which designates instances where the EPP's lack of activity indicates a limited salience of the issue; "denial", or the downplaying of populist tendencies of political parties; "collaboration" between the EPP and populist parties, either at the EU or national level; "demarcation", which refers to defining the confines of the EPP as a political family, both among its members, and *vis-à-vis* political opponents; and "confrontation", when there is no will to engage with populist parties and the aim is to defeat opposing views. Finally, it should be noted that all of these aspects of the EPP's behavior are to be considered both "internally", i.e. within the party's membership, and "externally", i.e. beyond the EPP and even the EU.

For decades, Christian Democratic parties and their leaders had been among the driving forces of the European project, a *status quo* that reflected the essential role played by the center-ground of politics since the postwar era within many Western European countries. This had

allowed the EPP to thrive by relying upon the political support of such political parties in the member states: that is to say that the EPP's influence over the then European Economic Community's institutions was the product of a distinct political landscape which, at the end of the twentieth century, was on the verge of momentous change<sup>16</sup>. On the one hand, the Christian Democrats were set to face an increasing challenge from right-wing parties, a trend which threatened to erode the group's clout in the European Parliament. On the other, further on the horizon lay the unknown territory of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU's membership, a development which would test the EPP's ability to garner support among new democracies that lacked a long-standing Christian Democratic tradition<sup>17</sup>. Both of these challenges would become far more acute as, with what had once been latent discontent over globalization and the (perceived) shortcomings of the EU, suddenly coalescing around the EU-wide crisis of 2009. This peak in the tension between pluralism and majoritarian rule across Europe opened up many member states, both new and old, to strengthened populist and Euroskeptic forces. As will become apparent from the following, the strategies developed by the EPP in order to manage such challenges are diverse and are indeed evidence of the multifaceted relationship outlined above.

## 2. *Fallout of the EPP's broadening strategy*

With "collaboration" here, we refer to those instances in which the EPP took what could be defined as a highly pragmatic approach to the complexities it faced, as far as maintaining and broadening its membership was concerned. This led to rapprochement with political forces, which had arisen beyond and to the right of the EPP tradition. This would engender a progressive realignment of the EPP, a shift ignited by pressures from then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and conducted under the stewardship of EPP President and Group Chairman Wilfried Martens<sup>18</sup>. It should be noted, nonetheless, that in the 1980s

<sup>16</sup> See S. VAN HECKE - E. GERARD (eds), *Christian Democratic Parties*.

<sup>17</sup> P. FONTAINE, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe*, pp. 331 f.; S. VAN HECKE, *A Decade of Seized Opportunities*.

<sup>18</sup> P. FONTAINE, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe*, pp. 323-328.

and 1990s, there was no immediate link between the realignment of the EPP and the rise of the populist challenge. Of course, populism predates the EPP, which was founded in 1976. However, it was not an issue in the first decades of the party's existence. The rapprochement with non-Christian Democratic parties was rather a mere reaction to the European Community's reaching out at the time towards countries that had never had Christian Democratic strongholds or where such forces had disappeared<sup>19</sup>. But this operation certainly brought the EPP much closer to populist politics.

In Italy, for instance, the collapse of the once dominant Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) in the 1994 elections—defeated by the self-proclaimed *homo novus* of Italian politics, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and his center-right Forza Italia party—highlighted how the EPP's voter base was in decline. While it may well have constituted the first encounter of the EPP with what can be defined quite accurately as a populist party, founded on the personalization of politics and the permanent campaigning against the establishment in the name of “the people”, a further distinction should be made<sup>20</sup>. This phase is in fact more significant in terms of how—by shifting the EPP's center of gravity towards the right—a decade later it would expose this party to a far closer, and thus more complex, relationship with populist parties.

Still, the entry of Forza Italia did not happen overnight<sup>21</sup>. Initially, many of the DC's successors attempted to become EPP members, but rather than meeting the EPP's electoral expectations, they were occupied with infighting over the Christian Democratic legacy, including at the European level. In early 1994, the Christian Democratic Center (Centro Cristiano Democratico, CCD), for instance, wanted to be the bridge-maker between Forza Italia and the EPP, resulting in a veto from the Italian People's Party (Partito Popolare Italiano, PPI) against the CCD's membership bid. Eventually, the CCD did become member, as did all of the other successors to the DC, nicely fitting into the EPP's strategy of reuniting the Italian Christian Democrats. After all, Berlusconi was internationally isolated and nobody within the EPP, not least Kohl,

<sup>19</sup> S. VAN HECKE, *On the Road*.

<sup>20</sup> S. FABBRINI, *The Rise and Fall of Silvio Berlusconi*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>21</sup> See W. MARTENS, *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome*, pp. 139-147.

was willing to change this. When this resurrection strategy did not succeed, the EPP turned to Forza Italia. First of all, MEPs from the Forza Europa Group joined the EPP Group in July 1998. The latter feared that the establishment of an alternative, right-wing group called Union for Europe could harm the EPP's position, a scenario that should therefore be prevented at all costs. The so-called "bungalow agreement" laid out the new strategy, finally leading to Forza Italia's EPP membership by the end of 1999. This change of strategy was not without collateral damage. Romano Prodi, Italian Prime Minister at the time, left the EPP as soon as Berlusconi was invited to its party meetings, while more traditional left-wing Christian Democrats established the so-called "Athena Group" led by former Irish prime minister John Bruton. Interestingly, while the Athena Group was founded "to protect and to promote the basic programme of the EPP" against political forces like Berlusconi's, the EPP stressed that it was "not looking for new values but rather to modernize and adapt [its] ideological legacy to new situations, responding to these, using a new language, dealing with new challenges"<sup>22</sup>. In other words, the political context had changed and, thus, so had the political practice.

Another prominent instance of "collaboration" between Christian Democrats and populist forces, in this case on the far-right and in the context of a national government coalition, was met with far greater opposition. In 2000, the formation of the new Austrian government of the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) and Jörg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) led to more than just protest and sanctions at the EU level<sup>23</sup>. Also within the EPP, there was much turmoil surrounding the unprecedented entry of a member party into a coalition with an extreme-right party that was clearly anti-establishment<sup>24</sup>. Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar even demanded the immediate exclusion of the ÖVP. Eventually, the Italian, French, and francophone Belgian Christian Democrats submitted such a request amid strong protests by the German Christian Democrats and the Forza Italia delegates, among

<sup>22</sup> S. VAN HECKE, *Christen-democraten en conservatieven in de Europese Volkspartij*, pp. 256 f.

<sup>23</sup> See M. GEHLER, *Präventivschlag als Fehlschlag*.

<sup>24</sup> See W. MARTENS, *Europe*, pp. 164-167.



others. As covert diplomacy was needed to get everyone on the same line, a summit of the leading EPP politicians in Lisbon on March 23 was cancelled, a unique event in the party's history. A compromise was reached when a committee of "three wise men" was given the mandate to monitor the Austrian political situation and report back to the EPP. The outcome of the report, issued a couple of weeks later, was clear: there was no reason not to rehabilitate the ÖVP within the EPP family. Governments in which member parties bear responsibility should be evaluated by their deeds, not by the antecedents of coalition partners. Interestingly, the report called upon the member parties' foundations to study the phenomenon of "rightist populist movements" as well as the link between mainstream left-wing parties and the extreme left. The EPP welcomed the re-entry of the ÖVP, stating that "[the] rejection of political alliances with extremes is one of the fundamental principles of the EPP"<sup>25</sup>. The latter clearly did not satisfy a number of Christian Democrats from the Benelux countries, France, Italy, and Spain. Under the leadership of François Bayrou, then president of EPP member Union for French Democracy (Union pour la Démocratie Française, UDF), the Schuman Group was founded in order to protect the Christian Democratic origins of the EPP. As a rather small current within the EPP Group, which tried to coordinate its voting behavior, it never managed to influence the overall course of the party. On the contrary, the EPP triumphed following the so-called "ÖVP crisis" as, according to President Wilfried Martens, it "achieved a remarkable victory at the European Council, for it adopted the reporting formula used by our monitoring committee"<sup>26</sup>. In other words, the EU decision was in line with the EPP's strategy of collaboration.

### 3. *Populism among the ranks of the EPP*

The aim here is to focus on the strategies that surround the presence of an increasingly populist party among the EPP's members. This appears to be met with a combination of denial of the allegations which—not without reason—are dismissed as politically motivated, and a degree of indifference when divergences are neither acknowledged nor addressed.

<sup>25</sup> *Resolution by the EPP Political Bureau.*

<sup>26</sup> W. MARTENS, *Europe*, p. 167.

As membership appears to be increasingly contested, demarcation emerges as a device for establishing red lines and ultimatums. This particular pattern captures the relationship of the EPP with populist parties, which at times is ambivalent, highlighting the tensions that arise when any such party is accepted into the fold. While there is perhaps only one instance that truly qualifies for this particular scenario, it is worth considering it some detail: Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary. The extent and nature of the "revolution" sought by the once liberal student-led party only became apparent following its election victory in 2010 and the attainment of a supermajority in parliament. The government set about taking the necessary steps in order to make key changes to the country's constitution, without interference from institutions or parliament, and with the aim of weakening the system of checks and balances to the government, in particular by undermining the independence of the judiciary<sup>27</sup>.

One particular measure, the forced retirement of 274 judges, sparked significant outrage across the EU, with the European Commission initiating an infringement procedure against Hungary as a result in January 2012. It was in this instance, and within the broader context outlined above, that the then President of the EPP Wilfried Martens and the Chairman of the EPP Group Joseph Daul released a joint statement in which, while expressing their unreserved support for the Commission's actions, they also sought to portray the new constitution as a positive achievement, implicitly denying allegations as to the threat it posed to the rule of law<sup>28</sup>. A similar message was sent out with Daul's speech during a plenary session of the European Parliament only a few days later, noting in particular how "[t]he Members of the EPP Group respect freedom and democracy, as does the vast majority of this Parliament. Mr. Orbán will prove to us that he also stands by these principles and values", in a further expression of the EPP's confidence in the legitimacy of the government's action<sup>29</sup>. This only increased the salience of the issue, with rival MEPs seizing upon the unusual circumstances to direct criticism against the EPP and the Hungarian government within the context of the negotiations with the Commission. In what was

<sup>27</sup> See M. BÁNKUTI - G. HALMAI - K. L. SCHEPPELE, *Hungary's Illiberal Turn*.

<sup>28</sup> EPP GROUP, *EPP Backs Proposals*.

<sup>29</sup> EPP GROUP, *Hungary: EU Law Comes First*.

becoming an increasingly politicized debate, a prominent Fidesz MEP, Kinga Gál, called for an end to the “groundless political hysteria” in a press release provocatively entitled *Sentencing before the End of the Trial is the Authoritarian Method*<sup>30</sup>.

Meanwhile, at the end of 2011 the Hungarian government had also passed legislation in order to allow greater control over its monetary policy: lack of compliance with the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP) resulted in the Cohesion Fund suspension in March 2012. It was then that the EPP Chairman Daul sought to introduce a degree of “demarcation”, requesting Prime Minister Orbán to comply with the assessment of the European Commission and noting that the rule of law of the country was at stake, signaling how there were limitations to the EPP’s tolerance<sup>31</sup>. By March 2013, the Hungarian government had introduced corrective legislation, and in June of the same year, the EDP was also lifted by the European Commission. The debate, nevertheless, was reignited by an EP resolution on Hungary, which noted how there was a trend that would lead to a “clear risk of a serious breach of the values referred to in Article 2 of the TEU-A”. The EPP Group reverted to its “denial” strategy, with the vice chairman of the EPP Group, Manfred Weber, stressing that the assessment of Hungary was politically motivated and also questioning the legitimacy of setting up a monitoring operation<sup>32</sup>. With the EP elections looming, it would appear that the EPP kept its distance from the Orbán controversies, congratulating Fidesz on its electoral victory in April 2014, apparently oblivious to the OSCE/ODHIR report in which it was highlighted how the “governing party enjoyed an undue advantage because of restrictive campaign regulations, biased media coverage, and campaign activities that blurred the separation between political party and the state”<sup>33</sup>. This is also an indication of how a further dimension of the EPP’s approach in such instances is also a degree of “indifference”, or a lack of public engagement on some of these matters.

<sup>30</sup> EPP GROUP, *Hungary: Sentencing before the End of the Trial*.

<sup>31</sup> EPP GROUP, *Hungary: Rule of Law Must Prevail*.

<sup>32</sup> EPP GROUP, *EP Report on Hungary*.

<sup>33</sup> OSCE, *Hungary Parliamentary Elections 6 April 2014*, p. 1.

The peak of the migration crisis in 2015 came with heightened anti-European rhetoric from the Hungarian Prime Minister. This materialized in a controversial public consultation in which economic migrants were defined as a threat, Brussels was criticized for its mismanagement of the crisis, and immigration was related to the rise in terrorist attacks. This added to the outcry that had followed a bid to open a debate over the reintroduction of the death penalty in Hungary: the EP responded with a resolution on these matters, supported by the EPP Group, which resorted once again to “demarcation”, indicating that a line had been crossed, all the while expressing the confidence that respect for the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights would endure<sup>34</sup>. Still, the EPP’s reluctance in taking a firm position *vis-à-vis* Fidesz attracted increasing criticism, its stance appearing increasingly hypocritical and opportunistic while failing to influence the Hungarian government with its dialogue-based approach.

The most recent proof of this constituted a watershed moment in this fraught relationship: in 2017, new legislation was approved, which would require NGOs that receive foreign funding to make their records public, hampering both their activity and their ability to obtain funds. Furthermore, specific measures were targeted at the Central European University (CEU) funded by George Soros, such as placing restrictions on non-EU staff, with the aim of preventing the English-speaking institution from functioning effectively. Following the launch of a public consultation entitled “Let’s stop Brussels!”, the EPP could no longer ignore the increasing calls for the expulsion of Fidesz from within the EPP Group itself. And on April 29, 2017, Prime Minister Orbán was summoned by the Presidency of the EPP. The stance taken there was unmistakably one of “demarcation”, plainly stating that restrictions of basic freedoms and the disregard for rule of law were unacceptable and demanding compliance with the Commission’s requests, as well as an end to the escalating anti-EU rhetoric<sup>35</sup>. While the EPP has declared that Orbán accepted its requests, for the time being this ultimatum has not had significant impact, with the latest controversy arising as a result of the anti-Semitic undertones of the campaign launched

<sup>34</sup> EPP GROUP, *Hungary: EPP Group Firmly Opposed to Death Penalty*.

<sup>35</sup> EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *Prime Minister Orbán*.

against Hungarian-American financier George Soros<sup>36</sup>. These recent developments all combined, triggering renewed condemnation from the EP through a resolution, which was supported by less than half of EPP MEPs, give some indication of how—for the time being—the scales appear to be tipped in favor of Orbán<sup>37</sup>.

The subject is undoubtedly a thorny one. It has been publicly addressed only in eight press releases over the past five years, with no academic publications by EPP foundations tackling the matter head-on: it would appear that the EPP has engaged with this issue rather sparingly, seeking perhaps to limit its salience. However, given the understanding of populism, which has been discussed above, the EPP's strategy of "denial", combined with the behind-the-scenes dialogue, should not be limited to a matter of political convenience. The fact remains that in the center-right of Hungarian politics, there is no other potential counterpart. The willingness of a party such as Fidesz to remain within a pro-European and establishment political family such as the EPP still provides a unique opportunity of engagement with a region in which the resilience of the rule of law and democracy is being tested. It is by no means a given that the exclusion of such forces would produce the desired outcome: engaging with populist parties and their claims is a dimension of also recognizing the legitimacy of the grievances held by their voters. On the other hand, one should not pretend that membership in the EPP has not provided Viktor Orbán with a shield of sorts, raising political dilemmas that are, inevitably, weighed against the electoral benefits that come with Fidesz's MEPs. It is in this sense that the debate over populism in the EU is also a normative one, in which labels are often attributed as a function of partisan interests as well as of broader political questions.

#### 4. *Rebels at the edge of Europe*

If the instances considered above constitute rather prominent examples of how the EPP manages its proximity with populism, the evidence examined yields an unsurprising result. In the vast majority of cases,

<sup>36</sup> K. THAN, *Hungary's Anti-Soros Posters*.

<sup>37</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *European Parliament Resolution of 17 May 2017*; VOTEWATCH EUROPE, *European Parliament Vote*.

the EPP's focus is, in its different guises, on distancing itself from populist parties and governments, condemning their practices, and seeking strategies to tackle this phenomenon. We refer here to "confrontation" activities directed at instances of populism that arise outside the EPP. The analysis of the content of the documents considered points us towards three distinguishable, if often overlapping, aims of this approach, all of which will be illustrated below. One such aim is to denounce democratic and rule of law backsliding or populist practices within member states; secondly, there are instances in which the objective is rather to identify political opponents, who are labeled as populist; finally, at times the aim is to highlight populism as an EU-wide challenge, an instance in which populism also coincides with anti-European tendencies more generally.

Reference to threats to the rule of law and democracy have been largely made with regard to developments in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2012 alone, the EPP Group issued eight press releases on the unfolding crisis in Romania under the Social Democrat Prime Minister Victor Ponta. In that instance, the EPP did not show the restraint that was reserved for Hungary in similar circumstances: there was no hesitation in defining the undermining of the judiciary's independence or the ousting of the country's president Traian Basescu as a "coup"<sup>38</sup>. The Group also released a statement opening up to the possibility of invoking Art. 7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) which provides the legal basis for the enforcement of EU values, a measure it had rejected with regard to Hungary<sup>39</sup>. In 2013, the EPP Group raised similar concerns when the Slovak general prosecutor was unlawfully replaced by the Socialist government of Robert Fico, who had already triggered a statement from Group Chairman Daul condemning his discriminatory rhetoric aimed at ethnic minorities<sup>40</sup>. In 2016, the by now all-too-common combination of reforms to undermine the judiciary and control the media was emerging in Poland, with EPP Group Vice Chairman Esteban González Pons warning that there was no place for authoritarianism in Europe<sup>41</sup>. The failure to address these issues was also

<sup>38</sup> EPP GROUP, *Romania*.

<sup>39</sup> EPP GROUP, *Having a Majority Does Not Legitimise a Breach of Law*.

<sup>40</sup> EPP GROUP, *EPP Group Concerned*; EPP GROUP, *Slovakia*.

<sup>41</sup> EPP GROUP, *EPP Group Warns Warsaw*.

strongly condemned in 2017 by Group Chairman Weber, asserting that the Law and Justice party was “putting an end to the rule of law and democracy in Poland and leaving the European community of values”<sup>42</sup>. These examples offer some indication of how the stances of European political parties and their parliamentary groups are not neutral *vis-à-vis* “populist” challenges. The undermining of democracy, the rule of law, and European values are, at least to a certain degree, a matter of perspective, which is emphasized, denied, or ignored as the result of political interests and normative evaluations. This further contributes to a blurring of the lines between democracy and populism in a manner that fails to objectively acknowledge instances where populism has eroded the foundations of the liberal State but also prevents openly asserting that engaging with, rather than excluding, populist leaders may well constitute the lesser of two evils.

There are other instances in which political adversaries are identified as populist, with the aim of this form of “confrontation” to portray the EPP and its members as the antidote to the “populist threat”. One such example is the press release issued on Europe Day in 2012 in which the debate between fiscal consolidation and Keynesian economics was defined as one between pragmatists and populists<sup>43</sup>. Boiko Borisov’s 2013 electoral victory in Bulgaria was hailed as a victory against “the relentless smear tactics and populist rhetoric of the Socialists”<sup>44</sup>. Later that year, when Borisov was excluded from the ruling coalition, the EPP released a formal party resolution in which it considered populism to be “the publically announced intentions of the ruling party to abandon further and necessary reforms”<sup>45</sup>. In quite a distinct setting, EPP President Daul defined the defiance of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’ “empty populist talk” welcoming the agreement on a new bailout deal in 2015<sup>46</sup>. These assertions are overtly political and, if possible, perhaps even more vague, as populism becomes one and the same with the political other, where what is pre-eminent is the distance,

<sup>42</sup> EPP GROUP, *PiS Government Has Crossed the Red Line*.

<sup>43</sup> EPP GROUP, *Europe Day*.

<sup>44</sup> EPP GROUP, *Bulgarian Elections*.

<sup>45</sup> EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *The Political Crisis*.

<sup>46</sup> EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *The New Deal*.



rather than the nature of the distinction. It should be highlighted that such cases are easily identified, as the designation of “populist” or “populism” is explicitly employed, while in most other cases, even if dealing with the same issue, these terms are avoided. This is proof of the challenge of discussing these matters in an unbiased manner: it is in this regard that some have pointedly noted how in the mainstream political discourse, it has turned into a “swearword” with which to dismiss political opponents<sup>47</sup>.

Finally, in the remainder of the documents the polarization between populists and non-populists is somewhat diluted. When it comes to press releases and other similar documents, the dilution occurs in terms of the in-group of the non-populist front, by implicitly appealing to pro-Europeans more broadly, in less of a politicized fashion. This appears to emerge within the documents issued by the party—which are far fewer, compared to those issued by the EPP Group. An example is the press release issued on Europe Day in 2015, in which EPP President Daul asserted, “We must continue working together in unity to defend our shared values and democratic rights against populist and Euroskeptical forces,” the “we” including an audience well beyond the confines of the EPP, and a far cry from the rather dry reference to fiscal consolidation in the same context in 2012<sup>48</sup>. The 2017 Europe Day speech reprised a similar tone, with Daul declaring that “the European project is the one that we can all embrace and Europe is the place that we can all call home”<sup>49</sup>. The spirit at times translates into clear displays of unity which tend to be directed beyond the borders of the EU: in May 2017, EPP President Daul and the President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), Hans Van Baalen, issued a joint statement on the electoral reform in Moldova, which was being pushed through parliament and which was set to benefit the ruling party<sup>50</sup>. Such statements exemplify how recent “triumphs” of populism, such as Brexit and even the election of Donald Trump in the United States, have resulted in greater unity among mainstream, pro-European

<sup>47</sup> T. AALBERG et al., *Populist Political Communication*, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *EPP President*.

<sup>49</sup> EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *Europe’s Day*.

<sup>50</sup> EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *Joint Statement*.



Europarties. This deepens the divide between liberal democracy and its populist dimension, a divide that is, however, fictitious as we have illustrated, and one which could lead to missed opportunities in dealing with such matters.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

What we have outlined above is, perhaps inevitably, a highly nuanced picture, which does not, however, prevent us from drawing some meaningful conclusions. The awareness of the fundamentally contradictory nature of liberal-democratic regimes has allowed us to account for strategies that are, in essence, a manifestation of such tension, thus overcoming political and normative biases. The first aspect that should be remarked upon is how the salience of and engagement with these dynamics are both relatively recent: the challenges only came into focus in the aftermath of the economic crisis, while it could be argued that a lengthy era of “indifference” preceded this phase of heightened concern. Secondly, a geographical distinction is necessary: the vast majority of the EPP’s public engagement with the populist challenge has been directed towards Central and Eastern Europe. Among new and prospective members of the EU in this region, the mainstreaming of populist tendencies is such that it constitutes a direct threat to the EPP’s constituencies. And this threat also emerges within its own membership, as in the case of Hungary. On the other hand, among Western European member states, populism tends to be a more adversarial force, perhaps even more so where the EPP’s strongholds are still relatively in good shape, thus limiting the need for the EPP’s involvement.

Another significant feature is that, while some of the EPP’s efforts have been directed at distancing itself from democratic and rule of law backsliding, i.e. through “demarcation”, in many instances its strategies have been equally aimed at managing and even accommodating an inevitable *status quo*. Both the political imperative and the EPP’s commitment to inclusivity and dialogue that lie at the base of developing “collaboration” strategies with populist parties also imply the proximity to a world-view that, as is apparent from Deegan-Krause’s six populist claims, contrasts quite deeply with the EPP’s tradition. The result is a balancing act that combines fending off attacks from opponents (denial) with efforts aimed at identifying common ground (collaboration) or, alternatively, at

circumscribing the extent of the EPP's tolerance (demarcation). Furthermore, it would appear that as of late, the latter strategy has prevailed, and as the overall salience of populism has grown, the politicization of the debate has been somewhat contained, with a cross-party consensus emerging on the need to address common challenges. Ultimately, the key to decoding this complex relationship is to acknowledge how, beyond normative and political hostilities, populism is deeply embedded in contemporary liberal democracies. The challenge faced by the EPP and other European political families is therefore not merely one of an external threat. If engaged with, it is one that leads to questioning the faith in the liberal order and the EPP's own position in the EU's political landscape, as well as its core values and principles.

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