

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 states¹. 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 forces². 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.

¹ G. LAZARIDIS - G. CAMPANI, *Understanding the Populist Shift*, p. 194.

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