

European Liberal Parties and the Challenge of Populism

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1. *Introduction*

Populism has been a phenomenon in European politics since the middle of the 1980s, which—notwithstanding some historical examples such as Poujadism in France—has hardly been analyzed by historians so far. Political scientists, in contrast, have dealt with the problem from the very beginning. There is no commonly shared definition of populism, first and foremost because populist parties and movements in various European countries differ significantly. There are, however, some similarities: populist action is directed against the elites of a political system. Populists claim to represent “the people”, “common sense”, or national interests, leaving aside the question of the concrete meaning of these notions. This goes along with the breaking of the real or imagined taboos of a society. These taboos refer to an interpretation of history or to the commonly shared habits of a society. Apart from that, populists claim to strengthen the nation and its representation. They are skeptical or simply against any integration of their respective country into international organizations—such as the United Nations or the European Union—and stress the significance of national independence. They are also opposed to economic and societal integration into world markets and, by extension, to globalization. Instead, they claim to favor the national economy and society over the “unreasonable demands” of world markets and transnational entanglements. Globalization is considered one of the origins of the economic and political problems of the present.

Political scientists have identified three major reasons for the emergence of populism since the 1980s. First, globalization and the dissolution of national borders played a role. The emergence of a single European and transatlantic capital market in the 1990s and the establishment