

Populism in power and its socio-economic policies: An assessment of European evidence

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen a surge in the populist phenomenon across all regions of the world, with populist parties and leaders gaining crucial policy positions in parliaments and governments (Caiani and Graziano 2022). The growing interest in the populist phenomenon worldwide (de la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019), which previously was centred on its protest and opposition functions, now includes its role in government. If at the turn of the century (1998) no such party had been in government in the EU, by 2021 (also thanks to EU enlargement) eleven countries had had experience of such participation, whether alone (Hungary, Poland, Greece), as main coalition partner (Italy, Czech Republic), as junior coalition party (Finland, Austria, Slovakia, Spain), or as external support (Netherlands, Denmark).

As a result in the recent years, research has shifted from the study of populism as an opposition, anti-system movement to the question of what populist governance and populist policies are. Beyond the empirical relevance, such question has also a significant theoretical relevance for debates on populism and liberal democracy. The first wave of scholarship on populism in power (Mudde 2013; Rooduijn *et al.* 2014; Immerzeel 2015; Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser 2016; Bartha *et al.* 2020) has paid little attention to policies. And the initial research on the policies of populist governments focused on those areas that were prominent in right-wing populist discourse when in opposition, in particular immigration and multiculturalism (e.g. Röth *et al.* 2018). Socio-economic and welfare policies have

attracted attention only lately, when, against earlier expectations (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2016), they have been found to be at the core of several populist parties' policymaking (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2018; Busemeyer *et al.* 2021; Font *et al.* 2021; Rathgeb 2021; Meardi and Guardiancich 2022).

The test of actual economic and social policies is necessary to assess Streeck's (2021) interpretation of «populists» as democratic resistance against globalism, and as a reaction to both the «de-democratisation of the economy» and the «de-economisation of democracy» that has taken place under neoliberal reforms and with the decline of trade unions and collective bargaining. Populists might be the first social force able to exert «beneficial constrains» on capital after the long decline of organised labour. However, the particularist nature of many such policies, and the hostility to intermediation, also suggests an alternative scenario of populism as «neo-illiberalism», combining economic neoliberalism with illiberal politics (Hendirske 2021).

The aim of this introductory paper and special section¹ is to contribute to fill this gap, by assessing the state of the art and combining the theoretical perspectives of two distinct disciplines that in this case appear especially complementary, those of political science and economic sociology. On the one hand, the lenses of political science and policy studies allow to unveil the dynamics of party competition, the relationship with social movements and the interactions among policy actors; on the other hand, the focus of economic sociology on the relationship between workplace and the wider social structures and processes places the analysis of populist policies in the broader context of our changing labour markets, economies and societies. While the initial association of populism with specific combinations of economic and fiscal policies (the notion of «economic populism» derived from the study of Latin American governments between the 1940s and 1970s) has now been dismissed, there still is a debate about what the distinctive policy content and distributional effects of populism are.

The structure of this overview is as follows. First, we will frame the issue through attention to definitional problems re-

¹ The papers were first presented at an international workshop held at Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, in March 2021.

lated to varieties of populism in power, including a discussion of the less studied «inclusionary populism» (section 2). Then, we'll critically review the emerging literature on populism in power and its socio-economic policies (section 3). Section 4 will pay particular attention to the case of «inclusionary populism' and welfare policies, still a novelty within the European panorama and for the European scholarship on populism. Finally, in section 5 we summarise the explanatory factors proposed by the literature and review their congruence on the basis of the experience of six EU countries, to conclude with the outlooks for future debates and research on the issue.

2. How many populisms can influence socio-economic policies of European democracies?

The definition of populism remains contested, both in relation to internal differentiation and the distinction to other phenomena, including fascism (Ost 2018) and technocracy (Bickerton and Ivernizzi Accetti 2021). It has nonetheless imposed itself in debates in political and social sciences to mark some noticeable breaks with traditional politics and in particular the appeal to «the people» against an «elite» and the frequent rejection of intermediary representative institutions.

The rapid rise of media and scholarly attention to populism has led to a frequent impression of «noise» and confusion with regard to lack of conceptual clarity and definitional diatribes. This is strengthened by the fact that very few contemporary parties (unlike in the past) define themselves as «populist», while most see the term as derogatory. Multiple definitions have been proposed. Populism can be seen as a political rhetoric that is marked by the unscrupulous use and instrumentalization of diffuse public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment and appeals to «the power of the common people in order to challenge the legitimacy of the current political establishment» (Abts and Rummens 2007, p. 407). It has been considered a «thin» or «weak» ideology (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015) that holds society to be ultimately separated in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups. It has been defined as a type of organization, characterized by the presence of a charismatic, personalistic and institutionalized (not belonging to the ruling elite) leadership (e.g. Kriesi 2018) and a special style of

communication (Tarchi 2015), namely without intermediaries, including a political strategy to conquer power (Urbinati 2014). Finally it can be seen, according to a socio-cultural approach (Mofitt 2014; Ostiguy 2018), as a political style, «a way of being», «a way of doing» (politics) and mode of relationship (as a founding father of the discursive camp, see Laclau 2005). In this sense, aspects such as relations, affinity, bonding, are emphasized as the crucial ones characterizing the phenomenon, which appear as normatively neutral or ambivalent.

Definitions of the concept, however, generally converge in seeing as the core aspect of populism its focus on «the people», i.e. the attempt to create a direct connection between the people and political power, rejecting the idea of intermediary bodies and representation, or mobilizing in the non-institutional arena. In these regards, the charismatic leader – mainly within the Latin American school of thought – is the only one who embodies the will of the common people and is able to speak on their behalf.

However, the very definition of the «people» remains ambiguous, such that Müller defines the notion of the people a «metapolitical illusion» (Müller 2016, p. 18). Cella (2018) has extensively pointed at the problematic aspects of linking the idea of political representation with that of «people». Competing interpretations try to clarify who «the people» actually are, some seeing the people in terms of class or ethnicity (e.g. Mény and Surel 2000), others referring to the heartland, namely a place in which in the populist imagination, a virtuous and unified population resides (Mudde 2004). Finally, according to a socio-cultural characterization, the people is local, from here, genuine vs. the elites, which are cosmopolitan, polite, far (Ostiguy 2018).

Among the distinct «varieties» or «subtypes» of populism and, in turn, different categorizations by scholars, there is the one between right-wing vs. left-wing (or exclusionary vs. inclusionary) populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). It is mainly based on three dimensions (material, political and symbolic) concerning the distribution of resources among social groups, the appeal to forms of political mobilisation that go beyond representative democratic channels, and the boundaries of the notion of «people». On all these three dimensions, inclusionary and exclusionary populist parties would differ in the degree of «inclusiveness» envisaged: e.g. favouring mass

welfare programmes vs. defending forms of welfare chauvinism. Moreover, left-wing populism targets ruling elites defined in an economic way (e.g. «the 1 percent»), while right-wing populism attacks both elites and out-groups (generally immigrants and/or other social minorities). They also differ in the higher importance they give to the economic dimension (left-wing populists) vs. the cultural one (right-wing populist) (Lisi *et al.* 2019). The debate on «varieties of populism» attributes considerable importance to the ideological component of these parties (Mudde 2016; Ivaldi *et al.* 2017; Pappas 2019); and identifies further varieties: «mainstream populism» (e.g. Tony Blair in the UK), «centre-right populism», «valence» populism (Zulianello 2020), as well as «hybrid populism», such as for instance the Five Star Movement (FSM) in Italy, which adopts an ideologically eclectic mix of policy positions and does not clearly locate itself on either the left or the right flank of the party system (Roberts 2019). According to the approach that stresses the variety of populisms, the ideological component is an important factor likely to affect the policy output of populist parties (Ivaldi *et al.* 2017; Mudde 2016).

These extensive debates on different varieties of populism have been almost entirely based on their discourses and electoral campaigns. The availability of a growing amount of evidence on their actual policies while in government provides the opportunity to test how much these differences matter and how far populist parties differ from mainstream ones in their outputs.

3. The socio-economic policies of populism in power

As mentioned, the majority of studies on populist governments' policies have focused on immigration policies, multiculturalism and law and order (Akkerman 2015; Heinisch 2003; Luther 2011; Zaslove 2012; Bale *et al.* 2010; Han 2015; Immerzeel *et al.* 2015; Lutz 2018; Rooduijn *et al.* 2014; van Spanje 2010; Yilmaz 2012). They try to understand to what extent populist parties are successful in implementing policies derived from their ideology, which for right-wing populists is nativist, anti-immigrant, anti-integration and characterized by conservative values. This stream of research, which initially has been mainly focussed on right-wing populists, in general emphasizes that these parties do not have a strong impact

on immigration policies. They mainly have instead an indirect and mediated impact through party politics (meso level) factors (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2014). As they become successful, mainstream parties, following a vote-seeking logic, adapt to recapture part of the electorate lost (Yilmaz 2012). Therefore, populist influence on immigration and integration policies seems to be mostly indirect (Akkerman 2015), as they move the «political game» toward more restrictive paradigms in terms of immigration, multiculturalism, law and order etc.

Given the limited number of cases of national governments led by populists, there is more evidence on populist policy-making at the local level (Bolin *et al.* 2014; Van Ostaïjen and Scholten 2014; Drapalova and Wegrich 2020). The limited research available has found immigration, security and institutional reform policies as the most salient for populist local-level policies (Paxton and Peace 2021). Falkenbach (2021) has also identified distinctive elements of welfare chauvinism combined with neoliberal restructuring in the health policies of local authorities led by FPÖ in Austria and Lega Nord in Italy. But in general, local government in Europe has limited roles in socio-economic governance and welfare policies.

At the national level, research in this field has recently increased (Röth *et al.* 2018), identifying a variety of paths between welfare retrenchment and expansion, universalism and particularism, regulation and deregulation (Afonso and Papadopoulos 2015).

Research on populism and welfare policies has mostly focused on exclusionary populist parties (Biard *et al.* 2019; Ennsler-Jedenastik 2018; Fenger 2018), in particular on welfare chauvinism (Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022; Jessoula *et al.* 2021; Rinaldi and Bekker 2021). Specific effects of populism have been detected in hindering welfare retrenchment, and undertaking generally more regulatory policies than mainstream right-wing governments (Röth *et al.* 2018). More specifically, Afonso and Papadopoulos (2015) have pointed at the welfare particularism of the Swiss People's Party, which since the 2000s helped protecting pensions while supporting the retrenchment of unemployment insurance, on the basis of a distinction between «deserving» old-age workers and «undeserving» unemployed. Rathgeb and Busemeyer (2022) have generalised this point across the distinction between social protection and social investment, with populists supporting the former but attacking

the latter. Meardi and Guardiancich (2022), comparing Poland and Italy, have added the gender dimension, pointing at the populist preference for familist social policies in countries where the family can still be realistically presented as the backbone of social solidarity, even if at the cost of gender equality. Added complexity comes from the importance of differentiating between direct and indirect influence of populist parties on public policies and in particular welfare policies (Biard *et al.* 2019). Few large-N studies have been attempted. Lutz (2018), in a comparative study on 27 countries, found that radical right populist parties' indirect policy influence is not generalizable across time and space. Various factors intervene, including the formal power enjoyed by populists in the political system and the «time» variable. Populist parties within government coalitions tend to limit themselves to their most salient issues – such as immigration policy.

The concept of economic populism has been used to describe the identifying feature of policies introduced by populist governments, in particular Hungary under Fidesz and to a lesser extent Poland under PiS (Oellerich 2021; Varga 2021), with echoes of the previous experiences in Latin American countries like Argentina under Perón (but also more recently Venezuela, Bolivia or Peru). The concept however refers to policies that are very different, such as the nationalisation of infrastructure in Argentina, constraints on foreign banks in Hungary or on foreign media in Poland. The recent experiences in Europe, which may include «Brexit», are highly ambiguous and do not constitute a clear departure from neoliberal policies on trade, FDI or finance – but, at most, a new form of their «embedding» (Bohle and Greskovits 2019).

More insights might be gained, rather than from the analysis of the high variation of single policy areas, through a broader picture that combines economic and social policies. A unifying element can then be detected in «producerism» (a coalition between workers and employers in the private sector and especially manufacturing) that inspires both social and economic policies, as well as approaches to interest policies and social concertation. Abts *et al.* (2021) describe producerism in the area of welfare, whereas Ivaldi and Mazzoleni (2019) in economic and especially trade areas. Producerism, in these accounts, uses nationalist rhetoric but is selective in the use of actual protectionism to few, often symbolic areas.

Producerism manifests itself most clearly in the defence of specific categories of workers but also of ex-workers. For instance, in 2012, the Dutch PVV (previously economically liberal) abandoned the government majority in protest against pension cuts, with leader Wilders stating «we don't want our pensioners to bleed just to meet the dictates coming from Brussels» (cited in Adorf 2017, p. 282). Mainstream parties can chase populist ones on this terrain: in the UK, after the Brexit referendum, the Tories proceeded to absorb the UKIP vote by presenting themselves as «the workers» party' at their 2016 conference and launched a number of social proposals, such as worker representation in company boards (in 2016, but never implemented), a higher national living wage (first proposed by George Osborne and implemented in 2017), and more protections for the self-employed (the Good Work Plan of 2018). At the same time, however, they maintained the 2016 anti-union legislation, mostly targeting public sector trade unions. In the 2019 elections, based on the British Election Study, the Tories, campaigning on Brexit as well as on the end to austerity, for the first time ever obtained more votes (45.4%) than Labour (30.6%) among the bottom 20% of the income distribution (Goodwyn and Heath 2020).

Even more visible have been the social policies of populist governments in Central Eastern Europe, where immigration is much less prominent as an issue and populists have to focus on other issues. The distinctive weakness of leftwing parties in the region leaves even more scope for others to focus on social demands. Poland is the sharpest case, where PiS has introduced several pro-labour measures, including a hourly minimum wage, stricter regulations on atypical contracts, improved regulations for trade union representation, as well as higher pensions and child benefit: even if they fail to constitute a clear departure from the previous liberal labour market model, the amount of pro-labour interventions brought Ost to define PiS' orientation as a form of «left of the right» close to the Italian fascism of its origins (Ost 2018). Savage (2022) also explains the counter-intuitive «leftwing economic preferences» of radical right populist party voters in Central Eastern Europe through the issue of ethnic diversity (such as Roma minorities) – an argument that needs to be integrated by the fact that ethnic minorities are often socially constructed or even invented (as it is largely the case of Poland).

Populist social policies have been seen by some as a form of Polanyian communitarian response to neoliberalism and austerity, as well as against European integration (Fisher 2020). An important reason that opened up opportunities for righting populist discourse on social policies has been the role of the new European Economic Governance following the Eurocrisis. With austerity instructions coming from European institutions, social conflicts could be reframed as national ones, on a terrain that is more suited to rightwing ideology: as Erne put it, social conflicts have been «nationalized» (Erne 2015). The responsibilities of neoliberalism for the populist counter-movement have been pointed by many, from Crouch (2011) to Hopkin (2020), who underline the decay of democracy and of social-democratic policies under globalization and the new European Economic Governance. More specifically, the space for populist parties on social policies seems to have been opened by social-democratic parties embrace of austerity (Horn 2020). In Central Eastern Europe, austerity has combined with emigration to produce a particularly fertile ground for rightwing populism (Meardi 2012; Finnsdottir 2019; Snegovaya 2020). A more «optimistic» view has been proposed by Iversen and Soskice (2019), who argue that while populist parties capitalize on the discontent of those «left behind» by knowledge-intensive advanced capitalism, inclusive education policies are sufficient to face off their challenge.

In both social services and labour market regulations such as wage setting, populist parties' appeal to the unity of the people and aversion of intermediary organisations mean that they are likely to oppose collective bargaining, social partnership, and bi- or tripartite institutions, preferring simpler, political forms of regulation. This has important implications not only for the content of social policy but also the form of its making. In Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, in Central and Eastern Europe, employment and social policies have often been the subject of formal or informal negotiations between government and organized interests, as in traditionally corporatist states or in the «social pacts» that were frequently used in the 1990s by countries that needed to build consensus for welfare reforms. However, with both the rise of European economic governance that moved the policy initiative outside the reach of national actors (especially in peripheral countries: Meardi 2014) and the political weakening of trade unions who have lost much of

their capacity to channel electoral consensus (Culpepper and Regan 2014), the «concertation» of social policy has become less attractive, even without disappearing (Rathgeb and Tassinari 2020). Rightwing populist parties may be particularly unwilling to engage with tripartite negotiations, preferring to stress their unmediated appeal to the nation. They do not have to become anti-unions, though – actually, this could be an unnecessary electoral risk. When possible, they could try to co-opt the less politically committed trade unions, or those with a more conservative ideology when available. A precedent of positive populist approach to intermediation and to labour is in the Latin American regimes of the mid-XX Centuries and in particular Peronism (Collier and Collier 1991).

As noticed by Prosser and Giorgadze (2018), the study of social dialogue and the study of populism have very rarely intersected. Yet it is of interest to study the link between the two phenomena, in order to understand both the social support for populist parties, and the directions of change of social and employment policies, and the possible roles for interest associations in a polity with strong populist forces. In particular, two competing scenarios can already be detected and deserve to be systematically compared, as in Tassinari (in this issue) undertaking. The first one is competition between populist actors and social partners, which can occur either by imitation (capturing trade union demands by populist parties), or by differentiation (different social policies frames, with populists preferring simpler and exclusionary policies). This competition could lead to either the erosion of social concertation into insignificance (substitution), or to its revival as business could prefer it as an antidote to the more expensive and unpredictable populist policies (mutual reinforcement), elements of which can be detected at the EU level in the European Commission's reaction to the Brexit vote. The second scenario is complementarity or even integration between the two, as in the historical model of Argentinian Peronism and various forms of authoritarian or democratic corporatism, a pattern that the PiS government follows with its close relationship with the trade union Solidarity. As Tassinari (in this issue) points out, inclusionary populism in power may involve a degree of normalisation, and more reciprocal imitation rather than competition between unions and new parties: the labour reforms in Spain, but also the slow convergence

of CGIL and M5S in Italy on the proposal of a minimum wage, confirm this interpretation.

It is worth noting that the ways in which populist parties in governments increase their appeals to work and production, as well as their interest in social policies, may be of both inclusionary and exclusionary ways. As Cella (2018, p. 17), following Laclau (2005) notices, the appeal to a «people» linked to «work» was present for instance in the Italian Communist Party and the Italian trade union CGIL in the after-war period, when union leader Di Vittorio used the expression «the working people» (*popolo lavoratore*) to combine class orientation with a unitary, national one. If rightwing populism tends to link people to the nation and therefore economic nationalism, inclusionary populism, especially once it is in power, has to find other grounds to define its policies.

4. Assessing the strange case of «inclusionary» populism

Left-wing populism presents some specificities when coming to its welfare policies. With regard to labour market policies, if populist parties often present themselves as representative of outsiders in revolt, rightwing populist parties' demographic basis tends to be insiders (middle-skilled, middle-age males), who are most likely to value protection from dismissal. These parties may therefore be cautious, and often ambiguous, on reforms of the employment status (Fenger 2018), but are likely to be more assertive in promoting the interests of the self-employed, including by keeping their social contributions low while expanding their entitlements. This is where the contrast is most striking with «inclusionary» populists.

Carella and Marengo (2022) and Tassinari (2022) in this special section study the case of Podemos and M5S, two archetypical «parties of the Great Recession» that emerged in countries particularly hit by unemployment and social insecurity (Vassallo and Valbruzzi 2018). Both of them have given a high priority to reforms in defence of «outsiders» rights. First of all, they both claimed the Labour Ministry in their coalition, marking the importance of employment issues for them. Specifically, they both launched, very soon after entering government, legislative proposals for platform workers, targeting in particular delivery «riders» (with the *decreto riders* in

Italy and the *Ley Riders* in Spain). The focus on a category of workers that is numerically very small, but very visible in the public space and public debates reveals the highly symbolic dimension of such interventions, as «signals» in the sense of signalling theory (Gambetta 2009). Legal interventions for delivery workers are cheap for populist parties (given their niche nature), but they would be relatively expensive for established, non-populist parties, as it would damage their reputation with business. Hence, the prominence of these reforms and their high resonance with the electorate, as they indicate a «new» politics. This new politics is also visible in the simpler form that social policies by populist parties tend to take in comparison with the traditional, more technical and detailed social and labour policies, as with M5S proposals for minimum wages or universal citizenship income to replace the Italian traditional more complex and more intermediated collective bargaining and diversified social benefits schemes. If there is a similarity in the way inclusionary populist parties in government have used the topic of the gig economy in Italy and Spain, there are also differences in the content and especially the form of their policy-making. In part this is contextual: Podemos is part of a relatively coherent centre-left coalition, whereas M5S has ruled with different, short-lived and very heterogeneous coalitions where any coherent socio-economic plan would have been difficult to introduce. But the fact that in Spain Podemos has led to a more comprehensive set of social reforms, including of collective bargaining, than the M5S constitutes an interesting small puzzle. Ten years earlier, during the Euro-crisis, anti-labour «structural reforms» had been more severe in Spain than in Italy (especially on wage setting), largely because Spanish trade unions are weaker than the Italian ones: the unionisation rate is respectively at around 15% and 34% (Meardi 2014). Why, ten years later, the reversal of those reforms is more systematic in Spain than in Italy, if the relative power of unions in the two countries has hardly changed?

A possible explanation, pointing out at the specificities of left-wing populism and socio-economic policies, refers to the relationship of populists to interest organisations discussed by Tassinari (2022), lies in the fact that policy reversals are a different game from policy reforms (Afonso and Buflone 2019). Resistance to regressive reforms requires mostly insti-

tutional power resources, of which Italian trade unions, much more than their Spanish counterparts, have demonstrated to still have enough to water down or delay the measures introduced in 2011-12, for instance in the field of collective bargaining decentralisation. But reversing reforms requires political initiative and activism, and Italian trade unions have lost much of their previous associational and societal power: their mobilisations in the 2010s have been muted in comparison to previous decades, and their standing in public opinion has fallen to extreme lows. In the absence of union action, it is other actors that have filled the gap, and in particular political populist parties. It is therefore in the country with the sharpest social crisis and the weaker unions that such actors have had most traction on leading social reforms, such as Spain (and Portugal).

A result of this activism is a significant performative effect by these actors in making the precarious workers they claim to represent an increasingly salient political category (Meardi *et al.* 2021). The results of these approaches will need more time to be evaluated. On one side, Podemos, and since 2019 also M5S, have moved to traditional Left positions and «normalised» their approaches to social policies (which have for instance become more technical and elaborated). On the other side, their social activism may still contribute to the de-legitimation of trade unions and of traditional social policy instruments. In the case of Central Eastern Europe, the rise of populism has been described as an «Exit» form of discontent that is alternative to the «Voice» channel of unionisation and social dialogue (Meardi 2012) and some Italian observers have suggested a similar inverse relation between new populist parties and organised social groups (Boeri 2017).

5. A review of proposed explanations and of empirical evidence in six European cases

Specific hypotheses have been raised with regard to the broader influencing or moderating factors on populist (socio economic) policies once in power. Beyond the ideological components (as seen in section 2 above) and the institutional framework of the country within which populists act, the formal power that populist parties have in government (Biard *et*

al. 2019) is expected to influence the degree and the forms of their impact on welfare policies.

In most European parliamentary democracies, the populists act within governmental coalitions that constrain their power (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). However, in semi-presidential systems such as Poland, and in (quasi-)majoritarian parliamentary ones such as Hungary, populist parties have the possibility of governing either alone or as the dominant political force in a coalition with junior partners – that is, they might face less or no constraint in following their interpretation of democracy (Kriesi 2018; Röth 2018). Iversen and Soskice (2019), among others, expect the balanced institutions of co-ordinated market economies to reduce populist risks more evident in countries like the UK or the USA.

Likewise, the impact of government responsibility may depend on both how long populist parties have been in power, and how long they have existed at all, as this affects the stage of their institutionalisation process (de Lange and Art 2011): parties tend moderate their discourse as they age.

While Iversen and Soskice (2019) are broadly optimistic on social foundations of advanced democratic capitalism and therefore argue that populism is bound to remain minoritarian, other studies looking at the social composition of populist vote indicate a link between it and the policy outcomes, which may result in populists contributing to «social blocs» that differ from those of mainstream parties (Afonso and Rennwald 2018; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Häusermann *et al.* 2022). A class-based approach helps understand some differences between northern Europe and peripheral countries in the South and East, but even more it would explain the differences between populism in Europe and North American, with its increasing reliance on semi-skilled production workers, with those of populist governments in emerging economies such as India and Brazil, with their emerging middle-class basis and a more neoliberal economic outlook.

Finally, national political cultures are also important, increasing academic attention focuses on the so-called political culture of countries, which can help or constrain the influence of populism in power: specificities among Eastern and Western Europe in the effects of populism are emphasized, determining effects which are context-specific and not easily generalizable (Leininger and Meijers 2020). For instance, republicanism,

liberalism, anti-communism and religious traditions can be mobilised to frame populist social policies, as in the case of the familist ones analysed by Meardi and Guardiancich (2022) in Catholic Italy and Poland.

The importance of these factors for studying the influence of populism in power on socio economic policies (i.e. in particular party and contextual factors) can be detected in six main experiences of populist parties in government in the EU, which have been selected as instances of different ideologies, welfare regimes, political systems, as well as of different forms and duration of power participation.

The Danish People's Party gave its support to Verste (the liberal-conservative alliance in government in the country) after the 2001 general elections in exchange for the implementation of stricter *immigration policies* (and it was successful in that). Its approach has been highly exclusionary with an important nexus between welfare and immigration since in their view «welfare should only be ensured to the Danish» (Brochmann and Hagelund 2011). More specifically, in Denmark, in the last two decades, there were two waves of welfare reforms with a considerable influence of the DF. The first in the early 2000s, where the party pressed for social policies that would disfavor immigrants, while at the same time trying to preserve or improve the social rights of other groups, especially elderly and vulnerable groups (Kvist and Greve 2011, p. 149). The second one in 2010, when the government austerity package led to the first cuts to family's benefits (about 5%) since the 1970s, which negatively impacted on ethnic minorities. The change towards welfare chauvinism (Careja *et al.* 2016) came to constitute a break with the universalist values of the Nordic Welfare State (Kvist and Greve 2011, p. 157). However, despite their nativist and chauvinist discourse, after the 2008 crisis they supported several cuts in social benefits and public employment to reduce the public deficit (Jensen 2017). Similarly, the Finns Party, when it joined the Sipilä cabinet as a junior partner in 2015, developed an exclusivist discourse on the defense of the Nordic Welfare State against the Anglo-Saxon liberal state (which they associate closely with the EU), while supporting cuts to low-income earners (Keskinen 2016).

In Hungary, Fidesz's economic policy has been classified as «economic nationalism» (Pirro 2017), favouring Hungarian nationals, and particularly economic elites aligned with Orbán.

It promoted «public works job program, pension hikes, utility bill cuts, a minimum wage increase and cash gifts for retirees» and a national public works programme (Molnar and Whigham 2021). Other policies however have curtailed labour rights, such as the flat income, the privatization of the country's compulsory private pension scheme, and the so called «slave law» that allows 400 hours of overtime per year. Adding to this, to boost Hungarian birth rates, Orbán announced recently measures to support families having more children (Visnovitz 2021). The PiS party in Poland has promoted strong social policies. The party opposes cutting welfare spending and supports universal healthcare. This is most visible in their family policies, characterized however by the defense of traditional values: it passed legislation that subsidizes having more children (among married couple), lengthen parental leaves, revived public housing programs (Shan 2019). It also introduced a partial ban on retail trade on Sunday (Karolewski and Benedikter 2017).

The welfare and social policies of the 5SM-League coalition cabinet in Italy are marked not only by an overall turn against austerity measures of previous cabinets, but also by an overt conflict with the EU budgetary rules, which could be interpreted as, overall, regarding both parties, a typical anti-elitist populist position translated at the supranational instead of national level. The Conte I government's main social reforms were the introduction of a basic income scheme (which was reserved with people resident in Italy for more than ten years) and a pension reform that reversed previous postponement of the retirement age. As mentioned above, a law was also passed with the aim to improve the working conditions of platform workers. In Spain, Podemos' proposals against austerity and for an inclusionary welfare were constrained by its junior partner position (Padoan 2021). It nonetheless achieved a cut in university fees, housing programmes, and the reversal of some structural labour market reforms, on collective bargaining and employment protection law, of the early 2010s.

To summarize, we can confirm the expected influences: stronger activism by majority parties (PiS, Fidesz, Lega-M5S), and distinction in approach depending on ideology and welfare model. In Nordic countries such as Denmark and Finland, populist parties appropriated the value of the welfare state, while giving it a more exclusionary character. The co-ordinated form of their institutions involved a high degree of continuity,

but the argument by Rathgeb and Klitgaard (2022) that the strength of ties between unions and socialdemocratic parties determine populist strategies towards labour institutions adds a layer of complexity affecting electoral competition. In Central Eastern Europe, the rhetoric is that of economic nationalism and paternalist welfare, although with different degrees of actual implementation. Finally, in Southern Europe labour market and pension issues have become central to parties that promise a turn away from the austerity policies of the early 2010s, but the content shows a bifurcation between inclusionary populist proposals that tend to resemble traditional Left ones, and the exclusionary approach based on nativism and familism. This rapid overview should be integrated by the important experience of social policies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The evidence is still too scant, however. Only three EU countries, Italy, Hungary and Poland, were ruled by populist countries in 2020-22 (the former in coalition). Whereas some anti-science underestimate of the pandemic and some authoritarian efforts were reported in Poland and Hungary, in the social sphere the distinctiveness of these cases is not clear. Taking as example the most impactful social policy during the pandemic, i.e. the job retention schemes, the level of support and the universalism of eligibility criteria of these countries is within the overall EU variation: medium-high in Italy, lower in Poland and Hungary but not out of line with the rest of Central Eastern Europe (Müller *et al.* 2022). The much-hoped post-pandemic recovery might reveal more distinctive features, for instance in the extent of social investment initiatives.

6. Conclusion

The emerging evidence on populism in power points at a growing, but selective, attention to socio-economic policies, rather than merely moral and cultural ones that dominate populist discourse in opposition, as instrument for keeping consensus and «signalling» difference from previous, more neoliberal governments. This happens for rightwing, exclusionary populists, but more clearly – if sometimes mostly symbolically – for «inclusionary» populist parties. The variation of populisms keeps questioning the pertinence of the «populist» label, which remains useful however in indicating the strong

simplifying effort of parties whose discourse is dominated by a direct appeal to «the people» – even if the distinction between populists and non-populists is increasingly blurred, as hinted by recent debate on «technopopulism» (Bickerton and Ivernizzi Accetti 2021) and experiences like the Draghi government, where both sides are in coalition.

The overview in this article reminds of the importance of considering both agency and institutional factors, as well as important critical policy dimensions. On the former, the experiences so far in Europe indicate the importance of party system dynamics (especially with regard to coalitions) as well as the enduring relevance of institutional varieties, which populist governments try to reframe rather than overturn. In terms of policies, gender issues, distinctions between social insurance and social investment, and approach to interest politics and intermediary associations emerge as particularly sensitive. There are some indications that populist parties in government start to «normalise» into rightwing or leftwing parties. But the process is still far from complete, and if Streeck's (2021) hopes for populism to become a beneficial constraint are still to be confirmed, the amount of social policy activism by these parties justifies ongoing apprehension from employers and trade unions, and continued attention by social and political research.

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Populism in power and its socio-economic policies: An assessment of European evidence

Summary: This introductory article focuses on the consequences of populism in power (i.e. in government) on socio-economic policies in Europe. It critically reflects on some expectations about the types and forms of the socio-economic policies introduced by populist parties when in government that can be drawn from political science and economic sociology literature. By mapping the early European evidence available and reviewing the explanatory arguments proposed in the emerging literature, it points at relevant institutional and political factors and distinguishes the different 'inclusionary' and 'exclusionary' types of populism.

JEL Classification: ???

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