Is Populism a Side-Effect of the Europeanization of Political Competition?

1. Outline of the topic

The workshop aims to investigate the rise of extremism since the late 1980s in Western Europe through a reflexion on the Europeanization of political competition. It will also take into consideration Central Europe, where comparable processes took place between the fall of communism in 1989 and the accession to the European Union in 2004.

Two series of explanations have been used to explain the success of extremist parties in the scientific literature. The first one analyzes the rise of far right political actors in a context of decline of traditional political affiliations (i.e. communist, social-democratic and christian-democratic parties), transformation of the welfare state and opening of national political fields. The phenomenon is labelled populism or radical politics and studied through an analysis of electoral behaviour and/or strategies of the leaders of these extremist groups.

The second perspective, focusing on the European dimension of this phenomenon, links the rise of extremist parties to a broader reflexion on the constitution of a multi-level European political system (composed of a subnational, a national and a supranational level of political representation). Under the generic term Euroscepticism, it deals with the attitude of political actors regarding European integration.

These two approaches to political extremism have developed simultaneously but in an isolated way from one another. Regardless of their different terminologies, they both rely on the implicit or explicit assumption that political games have become europeanised since the
1980s. Research on populism underlines the European dimension, in the geographical sense, of the populist phenomenon which spread over the continent since the late 1980s. The Euroscepticism perspective analyses the creation of arenas of political competition that are more and more distinct from national political games. The EU is portrayed as an autonomous and differentiated political space, where actors are involved in specific political games. This field of research sheds light on the transformations of the political systems of EU Member States, and particularly on the process of Europeanization that blurs the distinction between national and European political competitions (Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003).

This workshop aims to bridge the gap between these two fields of research in order to get a better interpretation of the rise of extremist parties. We would like to test the following hypothesis: positions on European integration are at the basis of the classification of political organisations as either “government” or “democratic” parties on the one hand, and “protest”, “extremist” and “populist” parties on the other hand. European issues are thus a new factor of structuring of political games that operates in a transversal way between European and national political fields, and strongly impacts domestic political lines of division. The consolidation of the distinction between populist and democratic parties can be seen as the result of the emerging European political field, at a moment in time when these so-called populist parties got their first electoral successes. By focusing on this largely unexplored phenomenon of structuring of national political competitions by European issues, this workshop aims at shedding new light on the rise of political extremism.

Taking issue with the populist hypothesis

According to the populist hypothesis, the Europeanization of extremism is the result of social or political processes which are specific to each country. Social transformations, reinforced by political phenomena, are the main explanatory variables for the rise of populism (Kitschelt, 1995; Mudde, 1999; Taggart, 2000). European integration is only a secondary factor in this development.

Most of this research takes into account the many social changes that recently occurred in European societies: the cultural liberalisation brought by the 1960s and 1970s post-materialist struggles, the opening of the economies through globalisation, migration pressures from Southern countries, difficulties of financing welfare systems, the fall of communism and, lastly, supranational integration in the European Union. These social transformations are
seen as the source of the weakening of post-war parties' electorates, because these parties are less and less able to provide goods such as jobs, healthcare or education (Katz and Mair, 1995). This undermines the stability of national political systems, leading to the crisis of consociative systems (Belgium, Netherlands) or deep institutional problems (several "cohabitations" in France since the mid-1980s or changes in the Italian political system in the 1990s). Extremist parties benefit from this deteriorating social peace: criticizing the "elites" and advocating "the revitalisation of politics through the people" is an easy way to electoral success (Canovan, 1981; Mény and Surel, 2002).

In this perspective, Europeanization is nothing but the result of the accumulation of national political situations which have enough in common to allow for generalisations - without demonstrating any clear link with European integration. Although these works offer thorough analyses of national cases, Europe is not considered as an explanatory variable. This approach raises two issues:

- Research designs tend to focus on populist parties that are electorally successful and to explain their rise by the fact that electorates are open to anti-democratic discourses in a context where large strata of the population experience social decline (Betz, 1998). Yet more detailed comparative case studies show the diversity of the trajectories of extremist parties, and the failure of some of these parties to attract votes despite "favourable" conditions (Zalewski, 2005). The broadly defined "European context" justifies the comparison, whereas a systematic diachronic approach would better explain how these parties manage (or not) to mobilise voters and define a position in the political fields.

- National political fields are the main level of analysis for the rise of populist parties. The Europeanization of this type of political mobilisation is implicitly considered as a consequence of nationally-driven phenomena, according to a mere cumulative logic (Ivaldi, 2004). The construction of a political space structured by specifically European issues is neglected; so is the impact of this new European level on national political fields. Showing concretely how Europe is used by populist politicians to demonstrate the opposition between “people” and “elites”, allows for a better operationalization of the European factor in the rise of populism.

**Taking issue with the Eurosceptic hypothesis**

The study of Euroscepticism is one of the main bodies of a growing literature on parties’ attitudes towards European integration in old and new EU member states (Taggart, 1998,
Sitter, 2000, Kopecky and Mudde, 2002, Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2003, Harmsen and Spiering, 2004). This literature, which gives a rich empirical account of the diversity of critical discourses on European integration, shows that each national political system has incorporated European issues in a specific way.

Academic work centres around an ideology-versus-strategy dichotomy to explain Eurosceptic party positions: some authors consider that critical approaches to European integration mainly derive from the parties’ origins, ideologies and identities (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002), while others stress positions in the party system, electoral strategies and coalition tactics (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2001, Sitter 2001). While writers on both sides of the argument accept that both set of factors interact in reality (Batory 2002, Batory and Sitter 2004), they often fail to grasp the relationship between the ideological and the strategic variables in Euroscepticism. This “blind spot” can be filled by adopting a research design that focuses on the usages of European issues in political competitions. In an interactive conception of politics, party positions on European integration are explained through their relational dimension. Ideology is created through inter- and intra-party competitions, by political actors seeking to differentiate themselves from their rivals in order to gain political capital, i.e. legitimacy and voters’ support (Bourdieu, 1981).

This is where linking Euroscepticism and populism helps better understand political extremism. Be they positive, negative or neutral, views on the EU are crucial in defining a party’s position in European domestic political fields. Thanks to its normative dimension as a symbol of democratic and liberal values, European integration helps distinguish legitimate, mainstream, democratic political actors, from illegitimate, protest, populist politicians. Parties with governmental ambitions have to tone down their criticisms of European integration, and Eurosceptic political organisations are stigmatised as « populist ». Therefore, positions on European issues are a major tool in political games to classify, exclude or disqualify political opponents. It is worth mentioning that these competitions also take place within political parties, where factions can find in European debates some resources to undermine or support party leadership. This raises the question of parties’ internal decision-making process (designation of leaders and candidates) and the procedures where militants can appropriate European resources (internal referendums, etc).

Taking into account the emergent European political space
We argue that in order to understand the causal relations between the rise of populism and European integration, it is necessary to single out the European variable and analyse the political resources created by the Europeanization of political competition - since the late 1980s in the Western, and since 1989 in the Central parts of the continent. We would like to investigate the articulation between the European political space and the national political fields, focusing on extremist actors’ strategies, along two main lines of thought.

1. The first issue concerns the usage of European resources by extremist parties acting at the European level. This consequence of the growing role of the European Parliament in the EU institutional system has so far been under-researched, although it is a crucial aspect of Europeanization that contradicts the perception of European elections as “second-order elections” (Hix and Lord, 1997, Kauppi, 2005, Déloye, 2005). When Eurosceptic and populist parties try to insert themselves in the transnational European political field, they are faced with a twofold paradox that this workshop could explore. On the one hand, extremist parties badly need the resources available at the European level, such as the affiliations to transnational political groups, as a sign of recognition by foreign parties and a source of legitimacy. Yet these affiliations can also be a further source of stigmatisation. On the other hand, the rise of Eurosceptic parties increases the benefits of participation in European electoral games for extremist parties - opponents to European integration thus compete for positions in the European Parliament where they can score well and get media attention. Papers could focus on the ways extremist parties are able to benefit from European integration to accumulate political resources that can be converted in national political competitions, for example to develop new themes and redefine political agendas or to reframe older issues such as regional and peripheric identities.

2. Second, the workshop wishes to break new ground in analysing the transformations of extremism that are induced by European integration but take place at the national level. The creation of a European political space has offered a new arena for extremist politics, whose impact on national electorates can only be understood by taking into account the structuring of European political competitions around the “populist-Eurosceptic” vs. “democratic” cleavage. To sum up, it seems that the cleavage between populist and democratic parties, which is built at the junction of the European and the national levels of political competition, has top-down effects on domestic political parties. This new cleavage appears as a result of conflicting strategies: competitions between “populist” and “anti-populist” politicians; circulation of specific strategies among extremist parties to mobilise resources (be they organisational, electoral, identity-related or programmatic). “Models” of populist parties are
spreading in Europe under the influence of the multi-level European political field. For example the “strategy of moderation” followed by the Danish People’s Party in order to be considered as a government party (Karpantschhof 2002, Pedersen 2004), has been followed by other European parties such as the National Front in France.

Papers using different methodologies and research strategies are welcome, but we would ask applicants to be willing to fit into the existing framework and to focus on extremist political parties under the influence of European integration. We are looking for either theoretical and empirical papers – or combinations thereof. Papers could focus on the transnational level (the European Parliament) or on the national level in EU member states. Particularly encouraged are the papers which propose a comparative outlook, either between extremist parties in several countries, or between several parties in the same country.

This workshop aims to contribute to the study of a complex European political system composed of national systems that remain distinct but are increasingly interrelated. As it focuses on the interplay between European integration and political extremism, it would be a useful complement to the analysis produced by two previous ECPR workshops: “Effects on incumbency on Organisation of radical Rightwing Parties” (Uppsala, 2004) and “The European Parliament and the making of a supranational elite” (Helsinki, 2007).

2 / Participants

This workshop is open to all people willing to take part in it. We explicitly welcome contributions from both junior and senior scholars, and are especially inviting scholars from the newly accessed EU Member States. Several colleagues have already expressed their interest or would be likely to answer our requests favourably because of the nature of their work.

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3 / Biographical notes

Laure Neumayer is lecturer in political science at the University Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne (Paris). Her current research interests include political parties and European issues in Central Europe. She is the author of several articles in edited books and in Revue française de Science politique, Revue d’Études Comparatives Est-Ouest, Politique européenne, Revue internationale de politique comparée, Central European Political Review... She has published two books : L’enjeu européen dans les transformations postcommuniste (Paris, Belin, 2006) and L’Europe et ses passés douloureux (with Georges Mink, Paris, Editions de la Découverte, to be published in April 2007).

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4. References


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