

Section 12 – Politica e politiche dell'Unione europea

Panel 3. The Populist Politics of Euroscepticism in Times of Crisis.

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The European Union (EU) has been exposed to multiple stresses during the past decade. Virtually every EU member state has been affected (albeit to varying degree) by the negative consequences of the economic and financial crisis that unfolded after 2008. While the actual causes of this crisis are manifold, its occurrence primarily emphasised the structural limits of the Eurozone as a currency union without fiscal coordination. Just as the economies of member states were exiting the most severe phase of the crisis and finally undergoing recovery, a new crisis struck the EU. Amid an increasingly instable international political scenario, asylum seekers from near East and African countries reached EU borders in exceptional numbers. The 2015 refugee crisis put under considerable strain the internal decision-making of the EU - not to mention the consensus about international principles of solidarity. In June 2016, finally, the decision of the UK's referendum to opt for 'Brexit' has the potential to be at least difficult, and at worst a full-blown crisis for EU crisis in terms of its legitimacy and need for reform.

Already in the months preceding the 2014 European Parliament elections, a number of journalistic accounts anticipated a populist Eurosceptic landslide as one of the likeliest outcomes of the vote. While this alarmist scenario did not materialise in full, the reason for assuming a populist takeover in times of crisis rests both in the ideological persuasion(s) of these actors and the loss of legitimacy that recently affected the EU. Populist organisations traditionally voiced their opposition to 'Europe' on the basis of a composite series of arguments; moreover, their ability to profit from moments of (real or perceived) crisis instinctively elevated them to potential beneficiaries of these particular junctures.

With the proposed panel, we set out to investigate and systematically tackle the intersection of populism and Euroscepticism in the face of the multiple European crises. Populism and Euroscepticism have surged to the level of becoming empty signifiers in public debates; as we argue, the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism is neither necessary, nor consequential. Most importantly, even when these features are found in unison, they are liable to adapt to changing socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances. We believe that the crises that have hit the EU over the past decade offer critical instances of change - and it is indeed the crucial element of 'crisis' that we intend to factor into the equation. Crises have been long interpreted as macro-level background conditions favouring the surge of populist parties; however, very little attempts have been made to address how populists perform crises. The panel critically connects the unfolding of the Great Recession, the refugee crisis, and Brexit to the Eurosceptic discourse of populist parties across a number of cases.