

**THE POLITICS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN
CONTEMPORARY EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF GERMANY, UK AND AUSTRIA (2000-2020)**

SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS

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Synopsis

The Politics of Right-wing Populism in Contemporary Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Germany, UK and Austria (2000-2020)

One of the most notable aspects of politics in the twenty-first century is the ascendance of right-wing populism. Several parts of the world have witnessed the rise of aggressive nationalism and right-wing populist sentiments, most notably in Europe and the United States. The word *populism* is not a novelty in the political lexicon. Populist movements have been evident in various countries and in varying forms; The nature of these movements have often differed from one country to another such as agrarian populism in Russia or populist dictatorships in Latin America. The rise of right-wing populism in contemporary times can be seen as a challenge to the very essence of liberal democracy. This upsurge indicates a slight shift in the domestic as well as global political order that had been established in the post-Cold War years.

The definition of populism is fluid and subject to a great deal of contention. Cas Mudde, one of the most noted modern scholars on populism defines it as;

“ .. an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”¹

Populism is also defined as a ‘thin-centered’ ideology since it has few core tenets and borrows heavily from other political concepts.² While populism can occur on both sides of the political spectrum, contemporary populism mainly focuses on the *right*. It is this area of right-wing populism in the European context that forms the focus of this study.

Thesis statement

This study aims to examine the nature of contemporary right-wing populism in Europe, focusing specifically on the case studies of Germany, UK and Austria. These case studies have been chosen keeping in mind their varying experiences with right-wing populism despite similarities in geographic, socio-economic and political features. Germany, a country where

¹ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2004, p. 543.

² *Ibid.*, p. 544.

right-wing politics was ostracized in the post war years, witnessed the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party as a reaction to the European migrant crisis of 2015-16. The party has been making rapid strides in recent years, capitalizing on ever-increasing levels of anti-immigration sentiment. The UK, too, has traditionally sidelined right-wing parties and groups though these have historically existed on the sidelines of British politics. The noted exception in recent times is the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which played an integral role in the influencing the referendum to leave the European Union in 2016. The UKIP is a classic example of a populist party relying on a charismatic leader, anti-immigration rhetoric and identity politics. Its disintegration post Brexit further confirms its nature as a fundamentally populist party thereby underlining its relevance to this study. Austria presents a different picture from its counterparts in light of the fact that it was one of the first European countries to embrace a right-wing populist party in recent times; the right-wing Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/ Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Freedom Party become the first of its kind to enter a European government in 2000. Till recently, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in coalition with the Freedom Party was one of the few right leaning governments in Western Europe.

This research project aims to look into the causes and nature of the rise of right-wing populism in these cases in the hope of gaining a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of right-wing populism itself. It will focus on the socio-economic political backgrounds in each of these countries to identify the factors that create the perception of threat necessary for the growth of right-wing populist politics. Its objective is to analyze if and why there is a variation in the occurrence of right-wing populism since these countries have had differing experiences with it. The crucial role of immigration as an inducing factor for right-wing populism will also be a central theme in this study.

Significance of the Research

The nature of populism has evolved with the onslaught of globalization and advances in modern technology and communication. Destradi and Plagemann point out that as populists rise to power all over the world, its implications can be felt in the respective governments' decision-making especially in areas pertaining to foreign policy and participation in international institutions.³ Populism, thus, exerts influence both at the domestic and

³ Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, "Populism and International Relations: (Un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 5, 2019, pp. 711-712.

international level making it a crucial area of study. Despite an ever-increasing ambit of influence, the basic tenets of populism, be it left-wing or right, have remained largely unchanged. Questions of identity and of the conflict of interests between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ remain central to populist politics even today. This study is based on the contextual background that contemporary right-wing populism, despite having commonalities in its fundamental underpinnings, is bound to have variational aspects in its causes and trajectory. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to analyse and compare certain crucial facets that contribute to the rise, progression or dissolution of right-wing populism in the three chosen case studies, rather than broadly categorizing it on the basis of a few parameters (such as conflict between ‘people’ and ‘elite’). In doing so it aims to shed light on certain aspects which are often overlooked in contemporary right-wing populist discourse.

Research Questions

This research proposes the following questions;

- 1) What are the causes of right-wing populism in each of these cases?
- 2) What role does immigration play in facilitating populist sentiments?
- 3) What are the factors that lead to variation in these instances of right-wing populism?
- 4) What is the role of oppositional forces against the politics of right-wing populism?

Methodology

This study has been carried out using discursive analysis method, making use of both primary and secondary data. The research has focused extensively on the historical and political background of right-wing populism in these three countries, the importance of immigration and the role of oppositional forces in shaping the discourse on right-wing populist politics. Keeping in mind the extensive nature of the research questions, the chapters have been framed addressing them in separate sections. The fundamental premise of the thesis is the fact that these countries, despite their shared characteristics as economically powerful western liberal democracies, have experienced right-wing populism in varying ways. The analytical framework of this work has thus focused on an extensive examination of the historical and political underpinnings that create the conditions for this variation. The methodological tools include analysis of archival documents, official immigration data, party documents and

manifestos of both mainstream and right-wing populist parties as well as interviews with experts. Field work has been carried out in the UK, and the following archives have been consulted; **Churchill Archives Centre** (Cambridge), **Wolfson Centre for Archival Research** (Birmingham), **National Archives** (London) and the archives of the **London School of Economics** (London). An extensive collection of archival data and documents has been consulted during the trip and interviews have carried out with experts in the area of populism.

The chapters in this study are arranged as follows:

- 1) Chapter one: Introduction outlining literature review and thesis structure
- 2) Chapter two: Germany case study
- 3) Chapter three: UK case study
- 4) Chapter four: Austria case study
- 5) Chapter five: Conclusion

Brief Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis outline and structure of this study along with the literature review. The major works relating to populism are analyzed and the broad overarching themes are identified in order to ascertain the gaps in the existing literature. The research questions and methodology are presented to provide an overview of the scheme of study.

Chapter 2 deals with the case study of Germany. As mentioned earlier, the chapters are outlined on the basis of the research questions, with each separate section dealing with a separate research question. This chapter examines the rise of right-wing populism in Germany through the historical lens of identity formation in order to understand why right-wing populist parties hardly ever became contenders in national politics. In doing so it aims to analyse the significance of the AfD's ascendance in a political environment that has traditionally been hostile to the political right since the end of the Second World War. The main sections deal with; *firstly*, the evolution of right-wing populism in Germany, *secondly*, the pivotal role of immigration and *thirdly*, the part played by oppositional forces in reaction to the right. The first section deals with the the unique historical progression of post-war Germany and its experience of denazification that created a national identity shaped by guilt and firm rejection of the political right. The second section analyses the liberalisation of Germany's immigration

policies along with its accompanying ramifications and the final section examines the role of the mainstream parties in counteracting right-wing populist politics.

Chapter 3, the case study on the UK, aims to examine the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and analyze why it was able to exert such influence, albeit temporary, in a country where right-wing populist parties have historically been relegated to the sidelines. Consistent with the design of this study, the chapter is divided into three sections as per the research questions. The *first section* analyses the *evolution of right-wing populism* in the UK in order to understand how right-wing groups and parties have typically been shunned from British political mainstream. The *second section* examines *immigration* in postwar Britain, questions of identity, imperial legacy as well as challenges pertaining to the integration of minorities that have shaped the discourse on contemporary right-wing populism. The final section deals with the role of oppositional forces to the right, mainly in the form of the two major parties, i.e. Labour and the Conservatives.

Chapter 4 deals with the case study of Austria and analyses the political fortunes of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/ Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in the last two decades. The party is of immense significance in right-wing populist discourse since it became the first party in post-war Europe to enter government as a coalition partner. The *first section* of the chapter deals with the *evolution of right-wing populism* in Austria, the historical sense of denial pertaining to its role in the war as well as the unique nature of the Austrian political system all of which are responsible for the high degree of tolerance for right-wing populist politics in Austria. The *second section* analyses the *role of immigration* in the rise of right-wing populism in a country with a high-degree of anti-immigration sentiment. The *final section* examines the part played by *oppositional forces* in mainstream Austrian politics which, rather than opposing, often end up collaborating with the FPÖ. This chapter charts the rise of the right-wing populist FPÖ in the backdrop of the wider context of the debates revolving around post-war Austrian history, national identity as well as newer challenges such as immigration and integration.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter which aims to bring together the major themes discussed in the previous chapters in an attempt to answer the research questions of this study. It delineates the widely contrasting causalities for the rise of right-wing populism in each of the countries examined, despite the presence of some broad similarities. This chapter aims to show that the differing historical backgrounds and political systems of these countries govern their respective levels of receptivity and acceptance/rejection of right-wing populist politics.

Furthermore, the crucial role of immigration in the rise of right-wing populism is also analysed from a macro-perspective, i.e through the examination of trends in citizenship, immigration and integration of minorities, in order to show how the interplay of these factors influence sentiments pertaining not only to immigration in particular but also right-wing populist politics at large.

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