Populism broadly refers to a political outlook that emphasizes the importance of the collective people in a given nation, often pushing back against the ruling elite that seemingly work beyond the average person’s understanding. Naturally, there are some conceptual issues surrounding populism, such as how ‘the people’ ought to be defined. However, the common enemy within populism is usually attributed to the political and financial elite of a country, who are seen to favour their status over the wellbeing of the masses.

Professor Cesare Pinelli at Sapienza University of Rome, and Substitute Member of the Venice Commission, Italy argues that populist beliefs are considered a threat by institutions in the European Union (EU) and leaders of the EU nations who are more closely aligned with values synonymous with the EU itself, such as liberty and democracy. The reason for this threat, Pinelli argues, is that leaders of nations with populism at its core often target the EU under claims that the EU’s bureaucratic tendencies, dictated by unidentifiable head figures, delimit the power and imperative of the ordinary person.

Politics of fear
As Pinelli highlights, the EU is not actually a government in its own right, but rather a broad political entity with a suggestive overarching control over its member states. While the EU has a parliament and an independent court of law, the actual governing body is spread out between different authorities. Pinelli points out that this form of governance makes it especially difficult to precisely identify the key decision-makers within the EU, affecting all the citizens across the member states. This lack of transparency makes the EU an easy target for populist nations.

This form of governance makes it especially difficult to precisely identify the key decision-makers within the EU, affecting all the citizens across the member states.
A glaring consequence of this smoke-and-mirrors bureaucracy is that national governments can leave the EU parliamentarian council to make important political decisions, while feigning innocence when the effects are at the expense of the finance and quality of life of the greater populace within their own country. This notion of mysterious unidentified rulers plays into the hands of governmental leaders in populist nations as it reinforces the idea that impactful decision-making is largely beyond their control. The ‘Brussels myth’ is an easy one to construct and assimilate into the hearts and minds of the average citizen. This ‘politics of fear’ of a masked enemy is an easy outlook for populist governments to disseminate under the banner of it being for the greater good of the will of the people. The irony is that the attacks made against the EU when deflect the blame that is placed on the real instigators of public unrest – the member nation’s governments. Pinelli argues that for the EU to defend itself against the populist surge, the Union must first consider changing its internal structure.

The Eurozone crisis and the blame game

After the Eurozone crisis, due to the influx of debt that several EU member nations, such as Greece, Portugal, Ireland, and Spain, were unable to pay between 2009 and the late 2010s, the EU became further susceptible to attacks from populist nation governments. The European Central Bank, one of seven institutions within the EU, had to financially assist the indebted nations, highlighting the importance of the EU itself.

This move, however, led to the understanding that the EU largely wanted to reduce spending within its member nations, inevitably lowering citizen welfare. Subsequently, the populists were more likely to redirect their attacks from the EU to the actual member nations that agreed to its policies in the first place. Regardless, the idea of the EU being the common enemy of the democracy has always been firmly reinforced by populist governments. When national governments shift the blame back onto the EU policies that are ‘beyond their control’, the only institution subject to criticism is the EU. Thus, it is predictable for the EU to consider populism as a big threat to its political foundation.

Law and order – transparency is key

There is another consequence to the populist belief that the EU ought to be criticised for the way it ‘dictates’ the legal and political decision-making of its member nations. Sometimes, national governments actively breach the guidelines set out by the independent judiciary and the EU. These governments are largely backed by the citizens of the nation states due to their firm belief in their governments’ rebellion against a projected threat to both their democracy and financial wellbeing. Pinelli states that the EU has dealt rather well with such breaches of EU law so far, but this is largely due to the lack of the governmental rebellion from its member nations.

There is certainly a threat to the legal and political milieu of the European Union. These threats stem from the beliefs of citizens of member nations with populism at its core and the governments of such nations. The EU appears to be in a constant tussle with populist nations despite some successful attempts to nullify their obstructed democratic power. As Pinelli concludes, until the EU institutions can perhaps justify the overarching legal ramifications and precisely identify the decision-makers, the threat is likely to persist, especially as populism gains more traction in the years to come.

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