The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: Comparative Conclusions

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Abstract

This article offers comparative findings of the nature of populist Euroscepticism in political parties in contemporary Europe in the face of the Great Recession, migrant crisis, and Brexit. Drawing on case studies included in the Special Issue on France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the article presents summary cross-national data on the positions of parties, the relative importance of the crisis, the framing of Euroscepticism, and the impact of Euroscepticism in different (comparative and single) country cases. We use this data to conclude that there are important differences between left- and right-wing variants of populist Euroscepticism and that, although there is diversity across the cases, there is an overall picture of resilience against populist Euroscepticism.

This Special Issue has focused on three crises that have hit the European Union (EU) in the past decade; the economic and financial crisis (the 'Great Recession'), the migrant crisis, and Brexit. As we have seen, the crises have been different in their nature and consequences, and gave rise to socioeconomic as well as sociocultural concerns within member states, in addition to raising broader questions about the sustainability of the European integration project. Each of these crises has offered opportunities for populist parties, which are defined by their defence of the 'pure people' and popular sovereignty against the unscrupulous actions of unresponsive or corrupt elites (e.g. Mudde 2004). Not only do such parties mobilise on the basis of real or perceived crises and elite failure, the events in the past decade also lend credence to the various Eurosceptic arguments voiced by populist actors on the socioeconomic left as well as the culturally conservative right (see Hooghe et al. 2002; de Vries and Edwards 2009). The last few years have seen waves of populism and Euroscepticism breaking together.

On the basis of these assumptions, the first question we asked was if, and how, the ideological contours of populist Euroscepticism have changed as a result of the three crises. At the same time, we recognised that Euroscepticism, like other elements of populist parties' agendas, is not necessarily the prerogative of populist parties only. Certainly, when such parties pose a real electoral threat to mainstream competitors, the latter are forced to respond to the challenge; one possible way being a co-optation of the Eurosceptic agenda. Thus, a second question we posed was if, and how, populist Eurosceptic discourses have reverberated across the party politics creating effects in the wider political processes of European politics.

To address these questions, we have looked at populist Eurosceptic parties in a number of West European countries and these case studies comprise the Special Issue contributions. Looking at Britain, Tim Bale (2018) focuses on the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and its relationship to the Conservative Party. Gilles Ivaldi (2018) looks at the French case and at the recent changes to the agenda of the *Front National* (National Front, FN) under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. Charles Lees (2018) considers the recent rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD). Sofia Vasilopoulou (2018) looks across the key parties in Greece where she argues that populism and Euroscepticism are pervasive. Andrea Pirro and Stijn van Kessel (2018) look comparatively at Italy and the Netherlands covering the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (5 Star Movement, M5S) and the *Lega Nord* (Northern League, LN) in Italy and Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom, PVV) and the *Socialistische Partij* (Socialist Party, SP) in the Netherlands. Margarita Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Carolina Plaza-Colodro (2018) address the cases of Spain and Portugal looking, among others, at *Podemos* and the *Bloco de Esquerda* (Left Bloc,

BE) respectively. Nicolò Conti (2018) rounds off the cases by looking across a range of cases at the attitudes of national political elites towards the EU.

In this conclusion, we seek to bring together the findings of these contributions to this Special Issue and to make some comparative observations based on the cases. On the basis of a collection of comparative and single-country studies focusing on a range of EU member states, we are able to formulate several conclusions about the nature of populist Euroscepticism as expressed by the populist actors themselves, as well as how the populists affected the political debate and stances in respective party systems. One key observation is that, although there is diversity across the cases, there is an overall picture of resilience against populist Euroscepticism. We subsequently discuss how our findings relate to existing literature on populism, Euroscepticism, and party competition more generally, and conclude with several avenues for further research.

European crises and populist Eurosceptic responses

Although the three crises had a wide impact across European states, they played out differently in different contexts. From a comparative vantage point, it is interesting to note how the effects of the Great Recession had been 'momentous' and widespread. This was particularly the case in those countries that suffered severe financial difficulties and whose populations faced far-reaching austerity measures. Meanwhile, the reluctance of citizens in 'creditor' countries to bail out Eurozone 'debtors' revealed the limits of pan-European solidarity. And yet, out of the three crises we have focused upon, the Great Recession is the one whose (institutional) legacies are harder to assess in terms of 'critical juncture' with such a short hindsight (Pirro and Taggart 2018). Looking at the Great Recession as a (mildly) favourable opportunity for populist parties in Europe (Kriesi and Pappas 2015) and, thus, part of a structural reconfiguration, means we have to also be alive to those electoral trends that have much deeper roots and are not solely attributable to the consequences of the crisis. Precisely for this reason, we focus on crises as both bringing in new challenges but also playing into older and more established trends of populism and Euroscepticism. Essentially, we are interested in ascertaining how crises are played out in populist Eurosceptic discourses.

While all countries have been – in one way or another – affected by the negative consequences of the Great Recession, the effects of the exceptional migratory flows into Europe and the challenge to European integration epitomised by Brexit had specific effects on different states. When the humanitarian crisis reached its most visible peak, we could at best speak of new migratory routes and entry points (e.g.

Milan and Pirro 2018), but immigration was already a prominent issue on the political agenda in various European countries. In this respect, the politicisation of the issue proved easier and, often, electorally successful in countries of first arrival (e.g. Hungary) as well as those of (desired) destination (e.g. Germany). The politicisation of the crisis by populist radical right parties clearly contributed to the framing of immigration in ethnopluralist and security terms, and also fuelled Eurosceptic sentiments in a context where it might be expected that the EU itself should have a role in responding to this issue. It is clear that populist Eurosceptic parties have also increased the salience of Euroscepticism, and of the EU issue in general within their party system.

Brexit, in contrast to the other two crises, started out as a *sui generis* and context-specific response to a strained relationship between the EU and one member state, and the chances that referendums on EU withdrawal could spread like wildfire were always unlikely. The complex aftermath of the Brexit referendum has made the issue a limited one for populists of any ideology to mobilise around. The *Front National*'s U-turn on 'Frexit' amid a heated presidential campaign, or the Italian populist parties' recent backtracking on referendums on exit from the Euro are, in our opinion, quite telling. This notwithstanding, Brexit is the crisis that comes closer to our understandings of critical juncture and transformative event. Simply put, Brexit comes across as a far-reaching and dramatic change that will be difficult to alter or reverse.

If we turn to the responses to the crisis by populist Eurosceptics, we can also see that the varying nature of the crises reflected differently on the framings of 'Europe'. As the contributions in this Special Issue demonstrate, left-wing populists, who see the EU as a force furthering a 'neoliberal' agenda and harming the interests of ordinary workers, could aim to capitalise on the austerity measures ostensibly imposed by EU institutions, and their negative social and economic consequences. On the other hand, proposals to seek a common solution for the inflow of non-EU migrants could be interpreted by right-wing populists as an attempt by the EU to force even more immigration and multiculturalism upon its member states. Brexit, an event that showed European integration is reversible, could be hailed by various kinds of populist parties as a victory for the ordinary people against unresponsive elites, and a rejection of the undemocratic and technocratic decision-making process at the EU level.

The theoretical implications of the migration crisis in terms of populist Eurosceptic framing were particularly evident – at least, for those populist parties with nativist leanings. After engaging with socioeconomic issues in the face of the Great Recession (Pirro and van Kessel 2017), populist radical right parties tipped the

balance of contention in their favour by swiftly returning to their ideological 'comfort zone'. Leaving aside the poor management and slow response of supranational institutions amid the humanitarian crisis, which may have raised doubts on EU efficacy among populists and non-populists alike, the 'long summer of migration' became a focusing event in that it helped reignite ethnopluralist and Eurosceptic discourses in a context of seeming disarray. It should therefore come as no surprise that populist parties such as the AfD, which initially defined their opposition to Europe in socioeconomic terms, expanded their agenda to anti-immigration.

The different crises thus extended the range of Eurosceptic frames typically employed by populist parties. Populists criticised European integration for its malign socioeconomic consequences, its threat to national sovereignty or cultural homogeneity, the creation of an illegitimate supranational system of governance, or a combination of the above. In addition, these parties could be expected to intensify or highlight their Eurosceptic arguments, and to adapt their framing of European integration as each crisis unfolded.

Generally speaking, the evidence from our cases corroborates our expectation that populist parties pushed their Eurosceptic discourses in reaction to the European crises. Populist parties across Europe typically took the opportunity to reiterate their objections to European integration at times when the EU was widely blamed for ill-advised policy measures or struggling to formulate an effective answer to cross-national problems.

This is not to say that populist parties were united in the nature of their responses: the cases under investigation in this Special Issue took varying positions on either side of the soft and hard Euroscepticism divide. Notably, left-wing populist parties, such as the Greek SYRIZA, Spanish *Podemos*, and Dutch SP, all clearly remained on the soft side, expressing their discontent with the EU's role in the Eurozone crisis in particular, but ultimately seeking a solution that implied a continuation of their country's EU membership. Right-wing populist parties were more divided, with some maintaining, or eventually resorting to, all-out opposition to their country's EU membership (e.g. UKIP and the PVV in the Netherlands), others essentially remaining soft-Eurosceptic or at least marked by more ambiguous or wavering positions (e.g. AfD, the French FN, and the LN in Italy). Ultimately, parties also remained divided on specific EU policies and matters such as Eurozone membership (e.g. the M5S in Italy).

It is clear therefore that the crises have not led to a unified populist response or a wholesale transformation of populist Eurosceptic discourses (see also Pirro and Van Kessel 2017). On the whole, the crises have not seen populist Eurosceptics change

tune but rather increase the salience and volume of existing tunes. As Bale (2018), for instance, argues in reference to UKIP, the Eurozone and migration crises did not make the party any more hostile to the EU, but 'merely amplified its pre-existing message'. Similarly, Ivaldi (2018) demonstrates how in the French case 'EU crises have been essentially 'absorbed' by the FN into its pre-existing Eurosceptic framework'. In general, then, populist insurgents have treated the events as an opportunity for electoral mobilisation more than ideological transformation.

The consequences of populist Euroscepticism

The second key question we sought to answer was how the varying populist responses to the European crises left their mark on the political debates in individual member states, and the positions of mainstream parties in particular. Under pressure from populist parties, have mainstream parties felt the need to co-opt Eurosceptic elements into their agenda, have they sought collaboration with populists, or was their strategy primarily geared at isolating or ignoring them? Our cases again show a composite picture and, in this section, we lay out the different forms of impact and the comparative results from our case studies.

By bringing crises into the study of the populist politics of Euroscepticism, we were especially concerned with the discursive changes that may occur within, and across, party systems. The basic assumption underlying our effort was that 'Europe' had turned into a central ideological battlefield amid the multiple crises. As populist parties are not only here to stay but have also managed to exert ever growing influence on public opinion and other parties, we assumed that their stances on 'Europe' might gain significant traction. Starting from these premises, we engage with two aspects of their impact: frame diffusion and the impact of Euroscepticism on party systems. With the first, we refer to the ability of populist Eurosceptic parties to spread their critical framing of 'Europe'; with the second, we speak of the broader consequences of populist Euroscepticism drawing from systemic considerations. While frame diffusion qualifies as a direct metric of discursive impact, party-political implications relate to the responses of (mainstream) competitors and signify an indirect effect of populist Eurosceptic mobilisation. In essence, we contend that Euroscepticism, as instigated by populist parties, may become an object of contention between populists and non-populists; or leave a mark on national party systems purely based on the specific (electoral) weight gained by populist Eurosceptics in recent times. The range of cases included in this Special Issue allowed us to reflect on the differentiated effects of the multiple crises and how – and how successfully – they have been performed by populist Eurosceptic parties.

In France, as Ivaldi (2018) demonstrates, the FN was the most prominent party beating the drum of Euroscepticism, initially advocating a French withdrawal from the single currency as a crucial theme in the run-up to the 2017 presidential elections. In its Eurosceptic discourse, the migrant crisis was a prominent point of reference, and the party also sought inspiration in the British referendum vote. In the light of Brexit, the FN softened its populist Eurosceptic trajectory in the final round of the 2017 presidential elections, when Marine Le Pen lost to the liberal pro-European candidate Emmanuel Macron. Other than that, Brexit seems so far to have had little impact on the party politics of the EU in France. While Euroscepticism has indeed turned into a viable discursive strategy for other actors across the political space (most notably, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, but occasionally also for presidential candidates Sarkozy, Fillon, and Valls), harder shades of criticism proved less successful in the elections. In the face of growing criticism of the EU among challenger parties, it is a moot point whether Euroscepticism was instigated by the FN, or a simple consequence of the crises. What is clearer, however, is that the oppositional discourse of the FN resonated little across an otherwise fairly pro-European context.

The rise of AfD in Germany has put into question the traditional immunity of Germany to populist radical right actors. The AfD is the most evident offspring of the Great Recession and the most vocal political project launched to blame the EU for the economic ills of Europe. Leadership changes have further contributed to set the ideological trajectory of the party along nativist tracks. Lees (2018) notes how the AfD invested in its populist anti-establishment profile and strenuously criticised the welcome policy of the third Merkel cabinet amid the migration crisis. The exceptional results returned at the 2017 general elections by the AfD (12.6 per cent) evidence a turning point in German politics. It is clearly difficult to determine how the fortunes of the AfD will evolve now that the party has entered the Bundestag. Without doubt, criticism of 'Europe' – as framed by the AfD – has gained very little traction and the populist politics of Euroscepticism seem set to remain marginal within the present scenario. Euroscepticism still represents a relatively isolated minority sport within the German party system, both electorally and ideologically.

Greece stood out as a case of severe consequences of the Great Recession; Vasilopoulou (2018) presents us with a case of widespread populism across the political space. The Greek bailout has considerably shifted the focus of attention to Greece-EU relations, and challenger political forces have made a great deal of the necessity to renegotiate terms of EU membership. Among these forces, the populist radical left SYRIZA had been the outsider party to benefit the most from its Eurosceptic platform, projected as it was from extra-parliamentary status to main

opposition party in 2012 – and ultimately governing party since 2015. In government, it formed an unconventional alliance with the populist radical right ANEL, precisely on the basis of a common Eurosceptic platform based on socioeconomic framings. Cultural frames, stirred by the migrant crisis of 2015, were played out by right-wing parties, but their diffusion remained limited and the overall prospects for their impact on the system low. Interestingly, however, Euroscepticism as a majoritarian stance bore only moderate consequences. In fact, the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition soon had to confront the harsh truth of non-existent bargaining power at the supranational level, practically reducing its Euroscepticism to a mere discursive affair.

Pirro and Van Kessel (2018) look at Italy and the Netherlands in a comparative perspective. Individually considered, we can see how Italy delivered a rather idiosyncratic instance of Eurosceptic overlap between two apparently non-congruent and rival populist parties, the M5S and the LN – this, of course, until coalition talks took off in the wake of the 2018 general elections. We see this point of convergence as telling, at least as far as the ideological fluidity of the M5S is concerned. Convergence between the M5S and LN on issues of European integration has been stark, and the M5S practically qualified as the only non-straightforwardly right-wing populist party among the cases surveyed to also adopt cultural Eurosceptic frames in the face of the migrant crisis. Having acknowledged their slow but inexorable castigation of the EU for the economic stagnation and the migratory inflows, both parties critically questioned Italy's continued membership of the Eurozone, only to tone down these aspects ahead of the 2018 elections and eventually drop them altogether (M5S). These elections returned the M5S as the largest party (32.8 per cent) and the LN (now simply called *Lega* in an attempt to move beyond its traditional Northern constituency) as the most popular party in the right-wing coalition (17.4 per cent). Besides ascertaining the influence that these two parties may have exerted on each other, as of March 2018 populist Euroscepticism ostensibly is a majoritarian element in the Italian parliament. The traditional pro-EU balance of the Italian party system has thus been altered and the prospects for populist Euroscepticism may be greater than ever before. We shall see how populist parties will make political hay out of their criticism of Europe.

The same cannot be said for the Netherlands, where Euroscepticism ultimately remains a phenomenon at the fringes of the ideological spectrum. The loudest Eurosceptic has long been Geert Wilders's populist radical right PVV, which largely based its 2012 campaign around the theme. Given the PVV's prominence, Eurosceptic frames have certainly gained a place within the fragmented Dutch party system. Mainstream parties, particularly those on the centre-right, have also been careful to publicly curb their enthusiasm for further European integration, stressing

that 'Brussels' should focus on key tasks only. Wilders's party was the only one, however, to support a Dutch withdrawal from the EU – at least, until the modest breakthrough of a radical right newcomer in 2017, *Forum voor Democratie* (Forum for Democracy, FvD). What is more, 'Europe' featured much less prominently in the PVV's lacklustre electoral campaign of 2017, showing for one how Wilders did not treat the Brexit vote in the UK as an incentive to reinvigorate his campaign to leave the EU. During this campaign, European integration was also not a central issue for the left-wing Socialist Party (SP). Although the SP has always criticised the neo-liberal nature of the European 'super state', it has clearly shied away from taking a hard-Eurosceptic position, and in some instances – like the migrant crisis – called on EU members to cooperate more closely.

In the Iberian Peninsula, the migrant crisis did not play a significant role. Portugal and Spain were not in the migratory routes and did not come across as desired countries of destination. The Eurosceptic battle was therefore fought over the consequences of the economic and financial crisis. Gómez-Reino and Plaza-Colodro (2018) suggest that economic issues and anti-austerity measures were transforming elements for the two party systems, propelling the fortunes of new, or newly transformed, populist radical left parties. In Portugal, populist Eurosceptic parties have joined the left-wing government coalition led by the Socialist Party, *de facto* centring the dynamics of contention on economic issues and the EU. While the specific weight of Euroscepticism has been high in systemic terms, the diffusion of these frames beyond populist parties has been more modest. Somewhat differently, the Great Recession opened up opportunities for a new left populist party, *Podemos*. The change brought about by the emergence of the movement party has been no less than momentous in altering the Spanish party system.

The UK relationship with the EU has traditionally been lukewarm. Euroscepticism has progressively permeated through the party system, reaching its tipping point with the referendum on the country's withdrawal from the EU in June 2016. The Conservative Party in the UK provides an obvious example of mainstream party Euroscepticism moving beyond the confines of mere rhetoric. After the Brexit vote, Conservative Party 'Brexiteers' occupied key positions within the party organisation as well as the government. Bale (2018) in his article highlights the complex tango between UKIP and the Conservatives, with significant shifts in positions on 'Europe'. The presence of UKIP has plainly contributed to the calling of the referendum on Brexit and significantly altered the Conservative Party's trajectory on Europe. In UKIP's discourse, moreover, the migrant crisis provided additional reasons as to why the country should leave the EU and regain control over its borders. UKIP's Euroscepticism placed socioeconomic issues and immigration at the centre of attention for British politics. Against this backdrop, the impact of UKIP's

Euroscepticism has been enormous as much as disruptive, and has played a key role in reconfiguring the dynamics of British party politics in recent years.

Moving beyond the confines of single member states, the insights offered by Conti's (2018) comparative analysis of national members of parliament (MPs) demonstrates that the (positive) attitudes of mainstream politicians towards European integration have not genuinely changed in recent years. This would suggest that Euroscepticism typically remains an attribute of parties at the fringes of the political spectrum (Taggart 1998), even if, largely due to the growing electoral successes of Eurosceptic populist parties themselves, Euroscepticism has become a more prominent feature of European party systems. A different question, however, is whether mainstream politicians are also eager to *publicly* offer unconditional support for the 'European project'. Certainly, when under pressure from Eurosceptic challengers, it remains tempting for them to shift the blame for unpopular policies onto the EU, while claiming credit for successes which may have been facilitated by the single market or EU policies.

<TABLE 1 HERE>

Table 1 attempts to collate the materials we have on country cases from the contributions to this Special Issue so that we can systematise some of the comparative findings. The interpretation of the data is that of the Special Issue editors, and involves some interpretation and extrapolation from the material provided by the Special Issue contributors. Columns 1 and 2 lay out the country cases and the relevant parties. The third column labels the populist Euroscepticism of the parties in left-right terms and shows how there is significant right and left populist Euroscepticism. In column 4, we highlight which of the three crises had most resonance in each of the country cases based primarily on our reading of the case studies. In column 5, we list the frame that is most dominant for Euroscepticism in the country cases. In columns 7 and 8, we summarise the impact of populist Euroscepticism along the two dimensions we have outlined above.

On the whole, the Special Issue has brought crises and 'Europe' into the analysis of populism and Euroscepticism. Having acknowledged the existence of 'many types of redemptive discourses' across the left-right ideological spectrum, we aimed at placing the 'cosmic struggle between a reified "will of the people" and a conspiring elite' (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 514-516) within the context of the multiple European crises. Through different perspectives and methodological persuasions, we tried to reconcile populism with the Great Recession, the migrant crisis, and Brexit and see how 'different political actors attempt to come to terms, resolve and/or manipulate' these events (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 2). In fact, despite a

self-evident connection between the rise of populism and critical conjunctures (e.g. Taggart 2000), little attempts have been made to interpret crises as performative acts that are socially and discursively constructed (cf. Moffitt 2016). In other words, populist actors may 'actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis' (Moffitt 2015: 195). We saw the last decade offering unprecedented opportunities for populist actors to demonise EU elites and frame them as responsible for the crises. Indeed, a Eurosceptic discourse may contribute to activating latent feelings of discontent or populist attitudes among citizens (see Hawkins et al. 2019).

Focusing on the ability of actors to perform crises allows us to overcome structuralist notions of crisis as triggering factor, or mere background context (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas 2015). While the succession in series of the Great Recession, the migrant crisis, and Brexit may represent a 'perfect storm' for populism (Brubaker 2017), we should also be aware that they may be linked with pre-existing structural conditions, conjunctural actions, and contingent strategic or volitional action (Sewell 2005: 109). This largely resonates with the changing and non-necessarily sequential framing of Europe by populist radical right parties in the wake of the Great Recession (Pirro and Van Kessel 2017). Ultimately, as the Special Issue contributions have also shown, Euroscepticism is not always a central element of populist parties' agendas (see also Van Kessel 2015).

Our findings have implications for the existing literature on Euroscepticism. The focus of this literature has primarily been in public Euroscepticism and party-based Euroscepticism (see Leruth et al. 2017). Recent work on public Euroscepticism has attempted to extend the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism into different types (De Vries 2018), reflecting the work on party-based Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008). What this Special Issue shows is the importance of different frames and the differential salience of these frames in different European contexts. Clearly then our research fits well with the increasing focus on the need to both disaggregate Euroscepticism and to differentiate salience. Our focus on how crises are also related to Euroscepticism fits well with a body of work focused on crises effects (Hobolt and de Vries 2016; Serricchio et al. 2013; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018).

The Special Issue also speaks to the broader literature on party competition, and the strategic behaviour of niche or challenger parties in particular. For parties on the ideological fringes, taking a Eurosceptic position is one way to put distance between themselves and mainstream parties (Taggart 1998). Previous studies have further shown that fringe parties can be successful in gaining support on the basis of their Euroscepticism, and thus 'have a strategic incentive to mobilize the EU issue in order

to reap electoral gains' (De Vries 2007: 368; see also De Vries 2010; De Vries and Hobolt 2012). The EU issue can also be successfully used as a so-called 'wedge issue': increasing its salience may expose dissent over the issue among rival parties and cause reputational damage (Van de Wardt et al. 2014). What the studies in this Special Issue have shown, however, is that politicisation of the EU issue is not always considered a viable strategy by populist parties, and that the three selected crises have not consistently served as 'external stimuli' for hardened and more pronounced Euroscepticism (see Harmel and Janda 1994).

One reason for this may be the fact that more specific and tangible issues, such as immigration and social deprivation, have been considered more potent in terms of electoral competition. Focusing on such issues has proven electorally fruitful for populist parties, and given that parties have little reason to change tack when they (or their counterparts abroad) are successful (see Somer-Topcu 2009), a change in course on 'Europe' may not seem a rational strategy. Differing visions, either among party supporters or members, about which precise position to take on the EU may also be a reason for populist parties to downplay the issue in order to prevent electoral losses or internal dissent (Steenbergen and Scott 2004; Rovny 2013; Van de Wardt 2014). What is clear, in any case, is that populist parties remain disunited in the intensity of their Euroscepticism, and do not all (consistently) treat Euroscepticism as a core issue (Pirro and Van Kessel 2017; Vasilopoulou 2018). The crises have not clearly altered the manner in which they use the EU issue as a tool in their competition with (mainstream) rivals.

Conclusion

The contributions in this Special Issue suggest that populist parties have been selective in their politicisation of the individual crises, and take different positions on the issue of European integration more generally. First, we can see an important difference between left-wing and right-wing variants of the populist politics of Euroscepticism. While all left-wing populists stuck to their guns, framing their criticism of Europe mainly in socioeconomic terms, the Great Recession offered right-wing populists the opportunity to elaborate on similar discourses, only to return to culturally inspired notions Euroscepticism at the peak of the migration crisis. Effectively, the M5S in Italy had been the only actor to hover between different framings among beside straightforward right-wing populist parties.

The second conclusion is that while there is a diverse picture, it does appear that in terms of impact the mainstream in many countries remains remarkably resilient against populist Euroscepticism. The impact on party systems is predominantly 'low'

or 'moderate'. The cases of 'high' impact are those most affected by the economic crisis – or in the case of Brexit, it is of course the UK. There is a danger then that the focus of our attention in considering the impact of Eurosceptic populists is on the spectacular cases where impact is high. And while there are these cases, we need to be more measured and more rigorously comparative before we generalise from the spectacular cases to wider trends.

At the same time, we should not uncritically assume that the electoral rise of Eurosceptic populists is primarily related to their Euroscepticism as such. Opposition to Europe neatly fits into their broader ideological profile but populist parties on the left and right do not necessarily treat 'Europe' as their most important theme. Although, partly due to the recent crises, European integration has become a more salient issue for voters across the continent, we should not be too quick to interpret their support for populist parties mainly as an expression of Eurosceptic sentiments.

There are two additional notes of caution that we should raise with respect to our findings. The first is geographical. We should be careful to note that the cases in this Special Issue are all West European cases and there is evidence to suggest that there is some very different patterning in Central and Eastern Europe (Pirro and Van Kessel 2017; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018). Thinking about Europe as a whole may mean something very different from thinking about it in parts. And we also need to be aware of the contingent nature of our findings. Particularly in the case of Brexit, we are talking about a process that is ongoing and which is likely to develop in unpredictable ways. Crises and impacts rarely have clear cut-off points and so we need to be prepared to revisit these conclusions.

What is clear however is that the confluence of populism and Euroscepticism has come at a time of real crises in policy terms for European political parties. The effects and impacts of those crises have, as we have seen, differed in the cases we have examined. The cocktail of anti-establishment populist parties with the increasing politicisation of European integration as an issue in domestic polities is an unmistakably powerful one. Added to this, the diverse effects of individual and cumulative crises in Europe around the economy, migration, and the exit of a key member state from the EU, shows us the growth of populist Euroscepticism across our cases as well as some key differences in both scale and form of it in different polities.

While the studies in our Special Issue have discussed the varied framing of European integration and the variety of Eurosceptic arguments by political actors, further research is needed to assess the embeddedness of crises in populists' performance as well as the impact of such framing on citizens' opinions and voting behaviour.

Current research is often concerned with the question of whether public Euroscepticm is primarily driven by cultural *or* economic attitudes (e.g. van Elsas and van der Brug 2015), but we still know little about how cultural and economic attitudes and anxieties may interact and feed into Euroscepticism. The other key question from our research relates to the EU itself and how far populist Euroscepticism functions within the institutions of the EU itself and the way in which these crises have been framed and salient within the European Parliament (EP). We have considered populist Euroscepticism as a largely exogenous factor but, given the developing scholarship in Euroscepticism within the EP (e.g. Brack 2017) it would be important to see how the meshing of Euroscepticism with populism acts as an endogenous factor within the EU. In the face of these challenges, interpreting populists' propagation of crisis as either triggering or intervening factor would attribute new meaning to the nested relationship between populism, Euroscepticism, and crisis.

Acknowledgements

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