

Peak Populism

How the populists can be beaten

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One year ago, Europe was in a terrible mood. We just had Brexit. We got Donald Trump. Many people predicted that Norbert Hofer would become president of Austria, Marine Le Pen president of France, and Geert Wilders would win the Dutch elections. That's the mood we were in one year ago today.

German publishing houses were reprinting Joachim Radkau's book *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität*, which first appeared in 1998. It is about globalization running full steam ahead one hundred years ago, just before the first world war. The parallels were clear: this was a time, too, when all kinds of inventions succeeded one another with dazzling speed, when everything became more complex, when interconnectedness was key. Just like now, society and politics were loaded with stress and crazy with anxiety. In order to find some peace and balance, Europeans took to yoga, herbal concoctions, extreme sports and all sorts of holistic healing mechanisms. But nothing worked.

Then came the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey, last year in December. A minute later, people tweeted: "Is this the Franz Ferdinand moment of the 21st Century?"

Talking about Twitter: I'm relatively new there. But since most of our readers – of a conventional newspaper! – come via Facebook or Twitter nowadays, I have to be there, too. I have to plug my articles. My theme is 'Europe'. I have a column about European issues every Saturday. A year ago today, I often ended up in the middle of horrible tweet storms. It was so bad that sometimes I didn't open my phone all weekend. My words were twisted. Most attacks were personal. They called me a whore, a traitor and worse. None of my followers lifted a finger to defend me.

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Lots of people sent me messages, though. They said: ‘Keep going! Don’t give up! You’re almost the only one who is not turning into a eurosceptic!’ This was nice, of course. Sometimes there were hundreds, week in, week out. But what worried me was that if so many did not agree with the eurosceptics which completely dominated the public discourse - why didn’t they say so? If they were outraged because the Prime Minister was telling immigrants “to go home”, why didn’t they speak out? Why were they sitting on the couch, watching it all with obvious horror, without doing anything?

But exactly those people – the people caught in the middle - played a big role, in the end, in turning the tide. The people in the middle, who were slowly being abandoned by political parties moving further and further to the right. And sometimes, to the left. It is, as Seymour Martin Lipset wrote in 1960 in his brilliant book *Political Man*, the middle classes we have to watch in times like these. If political parties abandon the middle field, all can get lost.

There are many explanations for the fact that the mood now is much better than last year. One: the economy has picked up, especially in the eurozone - while in the US and the UK it contracted. And two: maybe, as Ian Buruma suggested, continental Europeans know better than the Americans and British that things actually *can* go wrong. We Europeans have our dark past, after all, we cannot say: it doesn’t happen here. Well, it happens there, too – and Brexit and Trump are reminders of that. The third factor, I think, is that many people vote for populist parties just to give the establishment the middle finger for various reasons. But they do not want them to *become* establishment. I know a guy in The Netherlands who voted for Wilders a few times, except last March. “I want him to keep the government on its toes,” he said, “not to form the government, because of course he will screw up.”

All these things have helped to turn the tide. Today, I am hardly ever in tweet storms anymore. If it happens, someone steps in, defending me. Someone says: “Hey, read her article, she didn’t write that”, someone comes with supporting arguments. The mood has completely changed, from night to day.

In my view, what tipped the balance was that after a long wait, here and there people stood up defending the middle. In Austria, France, The Netherlands – everywhere mainstream politicians were copying the programmes of the populists. And then, it came late but it was great to watch, here and there the antipopulists stepped up. In Switzerland it was a group of students, who thought: “If the SVP keeps winning every referendum, closing borders and kicking out foreigners, this will not be our country any

longer.” Because no political party countered the populists, the students formed a movement – Operation Libero - and they started to do oppose the SVP themselves. These young, fresh, optimistic students have won referendum after referendum. They take the problems seriously, but offer positive solutions instead of negative ones. In Austria, a Green professor, Alexander van der Bellen, did what very few politicians in their right minds would have done just before elections at the end of 2016: he started explaining, on camera, how Austria profited from the EU and the euro like no other country. I lived in Vienna at the time. I know people from the left and the right who voted for that man. He brought common sense back in the heart of politics. And then came Emmanuel Macron. He was the only one who dared to counter Le Pen head-on, not only with arguments but also with perspective.

You hear relatively little about it, but Macron’s teams went from village to village with questionnaires for citizens, asking them “What goes well in France? What goes wrong?” They were the only ones actually doing something with the answers. For instance, many people had said that what goes well in France is ‘schools’, and what goes wrong is ‘education’. It looks like a contradiction. But it isn’t. Schools just want to get on with teaching, without being smothered by constant decrees of the ministry. So Macron decided they would not need an overhaul of the whole system – like every new Education minister always introduces – but, instead, just decentralization and they would be fine.

I think the big problem we had last year was that the populists were dominating the whole political field. Mainstream parties were so afraid of them that they never really answered the populists. The only story many people heard before the referendum on the Ukraine association agreement in The Netherlands, for instance, was from the no campaigners. They hadn’t even read the agreement and were proud of it. The government, who had fought very hard in Brussels to bring the agreement about, stepped back and said: “Let the people decide, we’re not going to get involved.” The only thing citizens heard was that the agreement was a piece of shit – and to ram that point home the no campaign printed the text of the agreement on loo paper, subsidized by the government.

The problem, in my view, is not so much the populists. I don’t like their views and their ways of functioning. But we have freedom of speech. When they stay within the law, this should be allowed. My problem is rather that so few people answer them. As a

result, all citizens hear is the populist story and not the other one. How will you vote on the Ukraine agreement if you only get the story from one side?

Many populists are social nationalists. They see many things changing with globalization. They also see that current levels of governance are not functioning well in an interconnected world, so we start inventing new, more global levels to deal with modern problems and challenges. People are afraid of losing control. They backtrack, demanding protection. To bring this about, the populists advocate “closure”: go back to the old structures of government and governance, and seal off the borders for muslims, refugees, terrorists, etc.

Of course they have a point. Their fears may be pumped up, but they are real fears. And the lack of control is real, too. What mainstream politicians have failed to do initially, is offer them protection *without* closure: protection in an open society. It is possible. Of course it is. But someone has to think it through, and weave it into a coherent vision and a plan. This is exactly what Van der Bellen and Macron and the Swiss students, for instance, have done. They have engaged with disgruntled voters. They have tried to show them that all is not going down the drain. That we can keep our open society, *and* get more protection, too. Maybe voters believe them only for half – but if it can be done this way, why not try?

Once that message got out, things started to change for the better in the whole of Europe. Van der Bellen became president of Austria. Wilders didn’t win. Le Pen didn’t win. This tilted the balance. It lifted the mood. For the first time, a few politicians countered the populist’s “closure” agenda. Immediately we saw ordinary people take to the streets in over a hundred cities in Europe every Sunday, waving European flags. It was clumsy, but the motions were very real. Then you saw all kinds of initiatives popping up. Young Germans doing discussion platforms with AfD voters. Dutch diplomats holding meetings with citizens in their kitchen. All over Europe, people got their courage back. Without some politicians and activists paving the way, they would have never taken to the streets. They would have stayed home, too afraid to get involved and to get exposed all alone, sending me anxious emails from their couch to “keep going”.

I think this is what happened during the last year and this is the way forward. Argue with the populists. Make your own points. And, most importantly: never *ever* abandon the middle again. Because that’s when things can go awfully wrong.