

# Populist Politics: From Protests to Violence



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# **Populist Politics:** **From Protests to Violence**

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**Dr. Patrick W. Murphy**

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First a couple of definitions of populism:

From Dictionary.com: “[A]ny of various, often antiestablishment or anti-intellectual political movements or philosophies that offer unorthodox solutions or policies and appeal to the common person rather than according with traditional party or partisan ideologies.

[G]rass-roots democracy; working-class activism; egalitarianism.”

From Vocabulary.com: “At its root, populism is a belief in the power of regular people, and in their right to have control over their government rather than a small group of political insiders or a wealthy elite. The word *populism* comes from the Latin word for ‘people,’ *populus*.”

These days the definitions sound familiar to Americans at both ends of the political spectrum. But in an oddly parallel development, populism is growing in Europe as well. The most important immediate example is perhaps the upcoming referendum in the United Kingdom, on June 23 of this year, on whether to stay in the European Union or not. Some time ago Prime Minister Cameron promised such a referendum; he may very well now wish he had not. The UK has always had what has been called a love-hate relationship with the EU. It was the last of the European Big Three, France, the then-West Germany, and the UK itself, to join what became the EU. The UK has continued to use the pound as its currency, rather than joining the “eurozone,” and has thus avoided the extreme frictions over the last several years among Germany, Greece, and other members of the eurozone. The British, even more than the Continental Europeans, seem fed up with seemingly endless regulations streaming out of Brussels, the capital of the EU, with little or no real democratic controls. It is likely that the referendum will lose and Britain will stay in the EU, but populism is clearly at work in the runup to the referendum.

Recently—and in the context of the upcoming British vote—Jean-Claude Juncker, himself the President of the European Commission, which is more or less the political decision-making authority of the EU’s government, effectively took a bow in the direction of that populism, or what amounts to a reinvigorated nationalism. He stated, “I think that one of the reasons why European citizens are stepping away from the European project is due to the fact that we are interfering in too many domains of their private lives.” He added that in many of those areas, individual states were “better placed to take action and to pass through legislation.”

In one of the more bizarre twists of populism in Continental Europe, a few years ago Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, after negotiating long and hard for a preferential trade agreement with the EU, turned against it just as it was being completed. In a perfect example of the concept of populism, thousands of ordinary Ukrainians took to the streets in downtown Kyiv, in particular on the Maidan, to express their anger at Yanukovich. In February 2014 he was forced to resign and flee into exile

under the protection of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The new government worked out the necessary details, and on January 1, 2016, the trade treaty went fully into effect.

Ironically enough, just three months later, on April 6, the Netherlands, itself historically one of the leading trading nations of the world, held a referendum on whether to accept that very Ukrainian trade agreement, which was in part meant to tie Kyiv more closely to the West in opposition to Russian pressure. The Dutch people voted 61 percent against the trade agreement, a populist reaction to the populist support of the treaty in Ukraine! There is serious doubt as to whether the referendum will have any real effect, as overturning the trade agreement would require all EU members to agree. Nonetheless, as the *Washington Post* correctly observed, “But the vote was closely watched as a bellwether of growing mistrust and criticism within the E.U., which has struggled to deal with a huge migrant influx and debt crises in member states, notably Greece.” Juncker’s comments about popular dissatisfaction with centralized EU rulemaking were proven correct.

More generally, trade agreements seem to be bearing much of the brunt of populist opposition. For decades the feeling has been that lowering tariffs through such agreements is a win-win for everyone: lower prices for both the United States and for its partners, Canada and Mexico, in the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA, for example. But there is now a reaction against such globalism. In the United States both Donald Trump on the Republican side and Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side have emphatically reminded the U.S. public that there is one set of losers: the American workers who cannot benefit from lower prices on foreign goods, because they cannot buy those goods since they just lost their jobs because their firms’ production was moved abroad. Populism and nationalism have had a powerful effect in the U.S. as well as in Europe.

Currently the United States and the EU are negotiating a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership or TTIP. The TTIP would cut further the already low tariffs between the U.S. and the EU, but it would also reduce non-tariff barriers (NTBs), which could include worker safety rules and environmental standards. The U.S. Administration is firmly in favor of TTIP, as are the European governments. But when President Obama recently went to Europe, thousands of people protested the deal in Hanover, Germany, precisely in large part because of fears that lowering NTBs might well damage their rights as workers. And the TTIP is certainly the kind of international trade agreement to which both Trump and Sanders have so vehemently objected. Thus, in this case unlike the Ukrainian-EU agreement, there will likely be plenty of populist opposition to the agreement within the bodies politic of both treaty partners, the U.S. and the EU.

The trade issue is basically an economic one. The other, even more important, problem is, for want of a better word, sociological: the arrival of well over a million refugees in Europe during 2015, probably 95 percent of them Muslim and perhaps more than 90 percent from the horrendously war-torn country of Syria. There is also a language problem: most of the refugees are Arabic-speaking, though a large percentage seems to know English fairly well. In many ways the arrival of so many quite “foreign” people sets the stage for a further escalation of longstanding tensions surrounding Muslims in Europe. These tensions have contributed heavily to the shocks of Islamic

terrorism in such locations as London, Madrid, Paris, and Brussels, which it again should be noted is the capital of the European Union.

Note that both trade and refugees are international problems, and specifically between the European Union and other European countries such as Norway on the one side, and the rest of the world. Even so, citizens of EU member countries continue to react to these issues on a specifically country-by-country basis, and not on a Community-wide level. As the following paragraphs will indicate, populism, though found widely throughout the EU, still takes its specific forms based on old pre-EU borders like the one between Hungary and Austria. Based on a supposedly out-of-date nationalism, the ordinary European citizen's first loyalty is still to his home country, and not anywhere near the same degree to the European Community as such, and by the same token he looks to his local national capital for redress of grievances.

Let us start with Germany, the EU's largest member. Last September Christian Democratic Union Chancellor Angela Merkel basically welcomed any Syrian refugees who wanted to come to Germany to do so, without conditions. It did not take long for a strong backlash to develop against her humanitarian decision, not least by her own Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (most of the asylum seekers entered Germany through Bavaria, the country's most southeasterly state). Other countries between Greece, where most of the Syrians entered the European Union, and Germany soon began to crack down on border crossings by the refugees by adding various kinds of controls, though Chancellor Merkel has never formally reversed herself.

This past March, six months after Chancellor Merkel's welcoming statement, three state elections were held the same day in Germany. Chancellor Merkel's party did not do very well, but exit polls showed that the two states of the old West Germany generally approved of her handling of the refugee crisis. The real shocker was that in Saxony-Anhalt, an Eastern German state with high unemployment, the three-year-old Alternative for Germany party garnered 24 percent of the vote. The AfD (for Deutschland) party's practical victory sent shivers down the backs of many Germans, as the AfD is clearly a populist party, and frankly a nationalistic rather extreme-right one in a country particularly sensitive to such groups.

Just how extreme is indicated by positions the AfD took regarding Muslims and Islam at its party conference on April 30 and May 1. Perhaps emboldened by its March electoral advances, the AfD stated, "Islam does not belong to Germany." It approved the ideas of prohibiting minarets and Muslim calls to prayer. Such prohibitions seem clearly against the German Fundamental Law or constitution. But the very discussion of such rather extensive controls on Muslims and the practice of Islam was both a populist reaction to the one million mostly Islamic refugees who entered Germany last year, and a challenge to the more centrist political leaders and parties in Germany.

But, of course, the refugee question continues to plague Europe as a whole. One reason the British are voting on possibly leaving the EU is the threat, as they see it, of having thousands of new refugees forced onto the British Isles. The right-wing UKIP or United Kingdom Independence Party continues to make gains—though on the other side, just a few days ago London did elect the Labour Party's candidate as the first Muslim to act as mayor in any major European capital. In Austria a member of the right-wing party recently won the first round for the largely ceremonial position of president,

presumably in part because of his anti-immigrant position. Just yesterday, May 9, the Austrian chancellor, a Social Democrat, quit because, he said, members of his own party were questioning his leadership—specifically in connection with the asylum-seeker issue.

The formerly Communist Eastern European countries are taking a hard line against accepting refugees, presumably at least in part because they are relatively poor themselves. On May 3 the Hungarian Supreme Court agreed to the Hungarian government's push for a referendum in which its citizens could vote to refuse the Brussels EU authorities' efforts to forcibly resettle in each EU country some of the tens of thousands of refugees. One day later the EU itself announced it would fine countries which refused to accept refugees by 250,000 euros, perhaps \$288,000, per migrant. It is doubtful that the EU could ever enforce such a distribution of asylum seekers among its 28 members, much less squeeze over a quarter of a million dollars per refused immigrant out of such countries as Hungary. This is especially the case, given the continent-wide growth of that very "us-versus-Brussels" populism which we have been discussing here. The new conservative Polish foreign minister said of the Brussels fine-for-refugee plan, "It sounds like an idea announced during April Fools' Day."

As we noted earlier, the growth of populism in Europe seems to parallel the growth of a populist movement in the United States. The elites or establishments of both areas will have to begin to take into account the negative side of globalism in international trade, for example, where vast numbers of people have lost their jobs because those jobs moved overseas—at least partly due to the removal of tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers and not just because of lower wages in China for instance. If such global trade is to continue to grow, greater efforts will have to be made to retrain and take other measures to alleviate the situation for affected workers.

The other important cause of the growth of populism in both areas, large-scale immigration, will also have to be dealt with. This includes both the 11,000,000 illegal aliens estimated to be in the United States and the 1,000,000-plus refugees who have recently entered Europe in the wake of the Syrian tragedy and, for many non-Syrians, because of the need for decent employment. The lack of the elites' interest in curbing such migration goes a long way toward explaining why populism, that "us-versus-them" mentality, has suddenly arisen on both sides of the Atlantic. For some members of the elites it means cheap labor, for others possibly votes, and for Angela Merkel and others it appears to be truly a matter of conscience.

But not everyone can insulate himself from the results of such migration, whether it be lower wages and the dilution of their votes for American citizens, or rape and sexual harassment for the young women of Sweden and Germany. If the elites wish their middle- and lower-class fellow citizens to back off populism and a renewed nationalism, and accept such large numbers of immigrants, especially Muslims at a time of widespread Muslim terrorism in Europe, the establishments will have to start examining their own positions and making some sacrifices, including, psychologically, that of a degree of condescension and moral superiority.



## Abraham Stein

*Former Deputy Secretary for Multidimensional Security and Senior Advisor to the Secretary General on Defense and Hemispheric Security, Organization of American States*

When street protests forced Guatemala's president to step down last fall during a corruption scandal, it seemed a rare break in a long and lucrative tradition of impunity in Latin America. A lot of people thought that a Latin American or at least a Central American Spring begun, well, yes and no.

Today in Latin America, democracy has become the norm. Cuba is the only dictatorship remaining. The authoritarian regimes of Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia are on the defensive. Brazil, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Peru and Mexico as well as many others, are ruled by democratic governments. And those democracies, despite their deficiencies, tend to be more liberal than conservative. It is hard to imagine a military coup taking place. (well remember Honduras?) Also in contrast to the 1980s, today, human rights are much mentioned and we are more likely to hear about civil rights but still, we have a very long way to go on the implementation of the rule of law. Corruption has become a key issue, as demonstrated dramatically by events in Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and Mexico. The political context is very different than it was in 1980.

Women have significantly expanded their influence in politics: Bachelet, Kirchner, Chamorro, Rousseff and Chinchilla are clear examples. At the same time, women increasingly occupy leadership positions *below* the level of chief executive in both the political arena and the economy.

Latin American populism is at the end of its recent cycle of popularity. In Venezuela, the death of Chávez gave way to the disastrous administration of Nicolás Maduro. Bad economic policies threaten the expansion of social rights, while political rights and the existence of an independent press continue to be, well, nonexistent. This combination of crisis and repression makes President Nicolás Maduro's regime more akin to classical left wing authoritarian regimes.

In Bolivia, Evo Morales suffered a historic defeat in the referendum held last February 21 in which he was seeking the support of the citizens in order to pass a constitutional reform that would have enabled him to run again in 2019, for a new presidential term ending in 2025.

This is the third consecutive defeat for parties in power in South America in recent months: The first being the defeat suffered by Kirchnerismo in the presidential elections in Argentina in November (after 12 years in power); and that of Chavismo in Venezuela's legislative elections on December 6 (after 17 years of exercising absolute control over the National Assembly).

Everything appears to indicate that the new economic cycle is characterized by a marked economic slowdown, especially in South America. Citizens' weariness with the "long administrations" (many of which have been in power for more than a decade) and the attrition they have suffered as a result, in addition to the new demands for more

transparency and accountability, repudiation of corruption, and the demand for better quality public services, are giving rise to the beginning of a new political-electoral cycle in which, in contrast to the recent past, change and alternation in power are now carrying the day.

What does appear to be clearer and clearer is that the winds of change and of alternation of power are beginning to blow more forcefully in the region, especially in South America; and that the age of the hyper-presidents is winding down. People are increasingly informed, empowered, and demanding. They are exercising their right to vote, and participating in non-violent mobilizations in the streets. The use of social media (Morales blamed it for his defeat) is placing clear limits on the efforts of these presidents to centralize their power and attempt to remain in power indefinitely.

Nonetheless, I would like to be careful in this analysis. We will have to wait and see the developments of the USA political arena during this election. Different results could trigger scenarios difficult to predict. Consequently, the importance of monitoring the next presidential elections very closely, not only those scheduled for 2016 (Peru, Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua) but also those to be held in 2017 and 2018, in particular in Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela (if the Venezuelan elections are not called earlier as a result of the current economic crisis and the clash of branches of government between the executive and the opposition).

Only after these elections, and in light of their results, will we be in a position to better understand the characteristics and trends of the new political-electoral cycle that is emerging in Latin America.

In additions, we cannot ignore the economic and trade partnership that just took effect:

The Pacific Alliance member countries—Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru—welcome the entry into force of the Additional Protocol to the Framework Agreement, signed in Cartagena, Colombia on February 10, 2014.

This Protocol is a fundamental commercial tool to move towards the free movement of goods, services, capital and people among the four countries. The agreement provides tariff liberalization of 92 percent of trade in the Pacific Alliance, as well as liberalization on the remaining 8 percent in the short and medium term. Its objective is to achieve free movement of goods among our countries in 2030.

The Protocol, in its 19 chapters, facilitates regional trade, removes trade barriers and establishes modern disciplines with regard to professional, maritime, telecommunications and electronic commerce services.

The Pacific Alliance (PA) is an example of a forward-looking integration initiative whose goals are in line with the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP).

2015 proved to be a rewarding year for the United States in many respects with regard to Latin America. That said, not all news will be good news for Washington and Latin America: Despite the formal normalization of ties with Cuba, the United States is unlikely to fully lift its embargo on the country in 2016 since the move would require

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congressional approval in an election year. At the same time, the Venezuelan opposition's latest win will not mean that Caracas suddenly becomes friendly with the United States, though deeper economic cooperation between the two is a possibility if Venezuela's financial climate continues to deteriorate. Elsewhere in Latin America, major powers such as Brazil and Argentina will seek closer trade ties with the United States to stimulate their sluggish economies. Again, though, political constraints and cultural differences will keep this from translating into the full adoption of a U.S.-style open economic system. But again, like many Mexicans, a lot of people down south think that Trump's aggressive rhetoric and alarming xenophobia could result in a disastrous relation between USA and Latin America, especially for Mexico. (FOX)



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