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Right-wing and left-wing populism in the EU and their impact on democratic processes

Abstract. Contemporary European populism, which has become particularly widespread in the last decade of the 21st century, is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon whose impact on democratic institutions has not been fully studied. The aim of this research was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the ideological foundations, electoral successes, and impact of populist movements on the functioning of democratic institutions in the EU. The study employed a comparative analysis method to identify the differences between right-wing and left-wing populism, an analysis of the programmatic documents of populist parties, a statistical analysis of electoral data, and the activities of populist governments. The main results of the study demonstrated the ambivalent nature and multivariate manifestations of populism in contemporary Europe. Significant ideological differences were identified between right-wing and left-wing populism, particularly in interpreting the concept of “the people”, the perception of fundamental societal divisions, and approaches to economic policy. An analysis of electoral successes demonstrated a growing support for right-wing populists in many EU countries, while left-wing populist forces showed a more ambiguous dynamic. The study of the impact of populist governments on the functioning of democratic institutions revealed serious challenges to the rule of law in Central and Eastern European countries, but less radical consequences in Southern Europe. It was established that the activities of right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Poland led to a systematic undermining of the principles of the rule of law through restrictions on the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, and the rights of the opposition. In contrast, left-wing populist governments in Greece and Spain primarily focused on socioeconomic reforms, avoiding the systematic undermining of democratic institutions. The research results revealed a growing trend towards polarisation of the political spectrum in many EU countries, which creates new challenges for the functioning of democratic institutions and maintaining the unity of the European Union. It was established that the impact of populism on democratic processes in the EU is contextually dependent and varies depending on national characteristics and the ideological orientation of populist forces. The research results can be used by public and governmental organisations and programs that promote political education and a critical approach to political choice

Keywords: Euroscepticism; nationalism; social justice; xenophobia; rule of law; electoral dynamics; political polarisation

Introduction

In contemporary Europe, there is a widespread proliferation of both right-wing and left-wing populism, which poses a threat to democratic processes and the rule of law within the EU. These trends are causing concern and require in-depth study, as they could undermine the foundations of European integration and lead to violations of

human rights and the principles of a rule-based state. The research problem lies in the fact that populist parties and movements, both right-wing and left-wing, are gaining increasing support from voters in many EU countries. They criticise existing democratic institutions, offer simple solutions to complex problems, and appeal to people's emotions

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and fears. However, once in power, populists often resort to authoritarian methods of governance, restrict freedom of speech, and violate the principles of the rule of law.

Research on this topic is important as it will help identify the reasons for the growing popularity of populist parties, analyse their impact on democratic processes, and suggest ways to counter these negative trends. Existing studies have already drawn attention to the dangers of populism for democracy, however, they have focused primarily on right-wing populists and have not covered all aspects of the problem. An analysis of publications demonstrates a variety of approaches to studying this topic. For example, C. Bedock *et al.* (2023) consider the challenges that populist radical-right parties pose to reforming democracy, focusing on their special position in this area. In turn, S.P. Ruth-Lovell & S. Grahn (2023) examine the relationship between populism and different models of democracy, questioning whether populism is a threat or a corrective factor for the democratic system.

Important considerations regarding populism and segmentation in contemporary Europe are presented in the study of J.E. Fossum (2024). The author analyses these phenomena in the context of challenges to the rule of law in the EU. In another publication, J.E. Fossum (2023) focuses on the sense in which right-wing populism poses a democratic challenge to the European Union, revealing various aspects of this problem.

The regional dimension of populism is reflected in the research of B. Fernández-García & Á. Valencia-Sáiz (2023), who pay attention to the peculiarities of populist movements in Southern Europe. At the same time, M.W. Svolik *et al.* (2023) convincingly argue that in Europe, democracy is being eroded precisely from the right flank of the political spectrum, providing compelling arguments to support this thesis.

A valuable contribution to the discussion on left-wing populism is made by K. Möller (2023), who analyses it through the prism of Jacobin flaws and transformative potential, considering the legacy of European social democracy. N. Bichay (2024) explores the impact on liberal democracy in Europe by populist radical-right junior coalition partners, filling an important gap in existing research.

Despite significant attention to the phenomenon of populism in the EU, several aspects of this issue remain insufficiently illuminated. In particular, there is a lack of a comprehensive comparative analysis of right-wing and left-wing populism, their ideological foundations, and electoral strategies. The impact of populist parties on the functioning of democratic institutions and adherence to the principles of the rule of law at both the national and EU levels has been insufficiently studied. The question of effective mechanisms to counter the negative consequences of populism for European democracy remains open. It is precisely to fill these gaps that this research is directed.

The goal of this research was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of right-wing and left-wing populism in the EU, its impact on the state of democracy and the rule of law in European countries. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set: to define the essence and characteristic features of contemporary European populism, its ideological differences on the right and left flanks; to study the electoral successes of populist

parties in EU countries, the factors of their growing popularity among voters; to analyse the activities of populist governments and their impact on the state of democratic institutions and the rule of law at the national level and within the EU.

Materials and Methods

The methodological foundation of the research was based on the fundamental principles of objectivity and systematicity, which ensured a scientifically rigorous and comprehensive approach to studying the phenomenon of populism in its dynamics, development, and interconnection with the broader socio-political context of contemporary Europe.

To achieve the research goal, a complex of interconnected methods was used. In particular, the ideological foundations of right-wing and left-wing populism in Europe were analysed. To this end, the programs, public speeches, and media content of leading EU populist parties, such as the French National Rally, the Italian Lega, the German Alternative for Germany, the Hungarian Fidesz, the Greek SYRIZA, the Spanish Podemos, and others, were studied. Based on the data obtained, key ideological differences between right-wing and left-wing populism were identified according to a number of criteria, including the interpretation of the concept of “the people”, the vision of the main social divisions, attitudes towards the EU, and cultural orientations.

To investigate the electoral successes of populist parties, the results of the 2024 European Parliament elections and national elections in EU countries during the period 2015–2024 were analysed. Official data from electoral commissions and statistical materials from Eurostat were used. In particular, the dynamics of electoral support for populist parties in France, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Greece, and Spain were studied. To identify the factors contributing to the growing popularity of populist parties, sociological data was analysed, including the results of Eurobarometer surveys (Standard Eurobarometer..., 2024).

The impact of populist governments on the functioning of democratic institutions was examined using the examples of Hungary, Poland, Greece, and Spain. To do this, the legislative acts adopted by the governments of these countries were analysed, including constitutional changes, judicial reforms, and media laws. The decisions and recommendations of EU institutions were studied, including European Parliament resolutions, conclusions of the Venice Commission, and rulings of the European Court of Justice regarding the rule of law situation in these countries. Particular attention was paid to the analysis of procedures under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (2020), initiated against Hungary and Poland.

To study the legal aspects of populism's impact on democratic processes in the EU, key legal documents of the European Union were analysed, including the Treaty on European Union (2020), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012), and relevant regulations. Special attention was given to the mechanism linking EU budget disbursements to the adherence to the rule of law, introduced in 2020 (Rule of law..., 2020).

An important element of the research was the study of statistical data on migration processes, economic inequality, and levels of trust in democratic institutions in

EU countries. Official Eurostat data was used, including the report on migration and asylum in Europe (Migration and asylum..., 2023), as well as research on income inequality in the Eurozone (Income Inequality in..., 2023).

To ensure a comprehensive approach to studying the impact of populism on democratic processes in the EU, the activities of right-wing populist and left-wing populist governments were compared. In particular, the policies of the governments of Hungary and Poland were compared with those of Greece and Spain. This allowed for the identification of common and distinct features in the approaches of right-wing and left-wing populists to governing and their impact on democratic institutions.

Results

The essence and characteristic features of contemporary European populism. Contemporary European populism, which has gained particular prominence in the last decade of the 21st century, is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Its ideological roots go back to the 19th century when movements in Russia and the USA emerged that appealed to the “common people” as opposed to the “elite” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). However, the recent populist surge in Europe is closely linked to the 2008-2009 financial and economic crisis, the refugee crisis of 2015, and other challenges that undermined citizens’ trust in established parties and democratic institutions.

Despite national specificities, contemporary European populist parties and movements share a number of common features. First and foremost, they all position themselves as the only true representatives of the interests and will of the “people”, which they understand as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous society of “ordinary people”. Accordingly, populists sharply oppose the “people” to the privileged “elite” – the political establishment, big capital, bureaucracy, mainstream media, and so on. According to populists, current elites are seen as corrupt, detached from the people, acting against their interests, and therefore should be removed from power (Webber, 2023).

A second notable characteristic of populists is their criticism of liberal representative democracy. Populists accuse established parties of being undemocratic, ignoring the will of the majority, and lacking real political competition. Instead, they advocate for “true” direct democracy in the form of referendums, plebiscites, surveys, and the like. At the same time, the promises to “return power to the people” in populist practice often go hand-in-hand with authoritarian tendencies – attacks on independent institutions, restrictions on media freedom, and minority rights (Pappas, 2019).

A third characteristic of populists is a propensity for radicalism, demagoguery, and the simplification of complex problems. They reduce their programs to a set of simple slogans and emotional appeals, dismissing rational arguments from opponents as a “betrayal of the interests of the people”. Populists exploit the real fears and prejudices of citizens, often resorting to xenophobia, Euroscepticism, anti-globalism, and conspiracy theories. Their criticism sounds emotionally appealing but is actually destructive and unable to offer real solutions (Bergmann, 2018).

Despite sharing common characteristics, contemporary European populist parties are divided into two

opposing ideological camps – right-wing and left-wing populism. Right-wing populism, represented by the French National Rally, the Italian Lega, the German Alternative for Germany, the Hungarian Fidesz and other parties, has some characteristic ideological foundations.

First and foremost, right-wing populism is rooted in radical nationalism with a racist inclination. Right-wing populists absolutize ethnic, cultural, and religious differences between peoples, demanding the protection of “indigenous nations” from foreign cultural influences. Immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and national minorities are declared to be threats to national states. Right-wing populists advocate a strict anti-immigration policy, the closure of borders, the forced assimilation or even deportation of “foreigners”. Sometimes their xenophobic rhetoric borders on racism and Islamophobia (Isaloo, 2023).

Nationalism is closely linked to Euroscepticism among right-wing populists. Despite differences in its radicalism, they all see the EU and other supranational structures as a threat to national sovereignty. According to right-wing populists, European integration has led to the erosion of national borders, identities, values, and the loss of control over politics by national governments. The “Brussels bureaucracy” is accused of imposing multiculturalism and “left-wing ideologies” on member states. Therefore, right-wing populists advocate for limiting the powers of the EU and returning them to national states, and sometimes even for leaving the EU (Pirro & Van Kessel, 2017).

A characteristic feature of right-wing populism is nostalgia for traditional values. Right-wing populists idealise the past of their countries, romanticise national traditions, the patriarchal family, and the Christian religion. They see cosmopolitanism, feminism, secularism, and tolerance of the LGBT community as undermining the moral foundations of society. Therefore, right-wing populists advocate for the restoration of traditional hierarchy and authority in the family, education, and culture, limiting the rights of minorities, and strengthening the role of the church in politics and community life (Pappas, 2019).

In socio-economic matters, right-wing populists are characterised by a combination of protectionism and selective support for social programs. On the one hand, they criticise globalisation and neoliberalism for neglecting the interests of “ordinary workers”, demanding state protection for domestic producers, jobs, and social guarantees. On the other hand, right-wing populists restrict access to social benefits to “their own” – native inhabitants – denying them to immigrants whom they label as “freeloaders”. The result is a specific ideological mix of right-wing populism – economic nationalism combined with welfare chauvinism (Otjes *et al.*, 2018).

Unlike right-wing populism, left-wing populism, represented by the Greek SYRIZA, the Spanish Podemos, the French La France Insoumise, and other parties, has fundamentally different ideological foundations. The main rhetoric of left-wing populists is anti-oligarchism with an egalitarian slant. Left-wing populists contrast “the people” not so much with ethno-cultural “strangers” as with big capital and political elites who have conspired against the working masses. Therefore, left-wing populism emphasises the class, rather than the national factor, and advocates for the interests of “ordinary people” regardless of their

ethnic or religious affiliation. The fight against socioeconomic inequality, the redistribution of wealth from “oligarchs” to “the people”, and the expansion of social rights are the key slogans of left-wing populists (Scanlan, 2022). Accordingly, they advocate for increasing the minimum wage, progressive taxation, protecting workers’ rights, free education and healthcare, nationalising strategic industries, and strengthening the economic role of the state.

Unlike their right-wing populists, left-wing populists are generally not nationalists or Eurosceptics. Despite some anti-globalisation and anti-American accents, overall, they do not oppose European integration and the international solidarity of workers. However, unlike Euro-enthusiasts, left-wing populists advocate for reforming the EU based on greater social justice and democracy. Instead of the current “Europe of bankers and corporations”, they seek to create a “Europe of peoples” with a developed system of social protection (Miglietta & Loera, 2021). A fundamental difference between left-wing and right-wing

populism is the adherence to progressive values and cultural liberalism. Left-wing populists are generally tolerant of feminism, the LGBTQ+ community, and multiculturalism. They are characterised by inclusivity, protection of minority rights, migrants, and refugees. Sometimes this leads to conflicts between “old” and “new” left-wing values, the traditional working class, and the emancipated youth in the electorate of left-wing populists (Scanlan, 2022).

Despite sharing basic structural features such as opposition to elites, criticism of liberal democracy, and a tendency to simplify complex issues, there are fundamental ideological principles and political priorities that distinguish contemporary European right-wing populist and left-wing populist parties. These differences are systematised in Table 1, which visualises the key ideological and value differences between the two types of populist parties according to a number of criteria – from the definition of the concept of “people” to the attitude towards European integration and minority rights.

Table 1. Ideological differences between right-wing and left-wing populism in contemporary Europe

Criterion	Right-wing populism	Left-wing populism
Political niche	Radical right	Radical left
Definition of “the people”	Ethnocultural community	Socio-economic strata
The main axis of conflict	Ethnonational identity	Wealth inequality
Priority values	Traditionalism, immigration restriction	Egalitarianism, social rights
Position on the EU	Strong Euroscepticism	Moderate Euroscepticism
Cultural orientations	Conservatism, xenophobia	Progressivism, inclusivity

Source: compiled based on T.S. Pappas (2019), M.A. Scanlan (2022), J. Webber (2023)

As the table shows, the ideological spectrum of populist parties in contemporary Europe is quite varied. The right and left flanks of populism interpret the very concept of “people” differently, perceive major societal divisions and challenges differently, and set different value priorities. The amplitude of these differences ranges from the radical ethno-nationalism and traditionalism of right-wing populists to the egalitarianism and progressivism of the left wing. At the same time, these ideological variations do not cancel out the key essential feature of populism – the conceptual division of “the people” and the “elite” with a claim to the monopolistic representation of the former’s interests. Therefore, despite the polarity of ideological vectors, European populism constitutes a cohesive phenomenon that challenges established political norms.

In summary, it can be stated that the phenomenon of populism in contemporary Europe is ambivalent and multivariant. Despite the commonality of structural features (the opposition of “the people” and the “elite”, criticism of liberal democracy, a tendency to oversimplify), right-wing and left-wing populism differ significantly in their ideological content – from their attitude towards the nation and tradition to their vision of driving social conflicts. This makes populism a “chameleon”, capable of taking on opposite colours depending on the context. At the same time, all varieties of populism challenge established political systems and force a rethinking of the future of democracy in Europe.

The electoral successes of populist parties in EU countries. The results of the European Parliament elections in June 2024 demonstrate a significant increase in

support for right-wing populist parties in many EU countries. Specifically, in France, the National Rally led by Jordan Bardella achieved a historic victory in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, receiving 31.5% of the votes. It became the first French party since 1984 to surpass the 30% threshold in European elections. This significantly surpassed the result of President E. Macron’s Renaissance party received only 15.2% support, more than twice less than the National Rally. Compared to the previous elections in 2019, right-wing populists increased their support by 8 percentage points, while Macron’s party lost nearly 7 points. The leader of the National Rally, Jordan Bardella, commented on the victory as follows: “This is a clear message addressed to Emmanuel Macron and European leaders and marks our country’s determination to see the European Union change direction” (France: Marine Le Pen’s..., 2024).

In response to this result, President E. Macron announced the dissolution of the National Assembly, stating, “I can’t pretend that nothing has happened”. He also warned that “the rise of the nationalists and demagogues is a threat not only to our nation but also to our Europe and to France’s place in Europe and in the world” (France: Marine Le Pen’s..., 2024).

In Italy, the party Brothers of Italy led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni achieved a convincing victory in the elections, receiving 28% of the vote. This significantly improved their result compared to previous elections and strengthened Giorgia Meloni’s position as a key player not only in Italian but also in pan-European politics. Brothers of Italy notably outpaced their coalition partners – Matteo

Salvini's Lega which received only 8% (a sharp drop from 34.3% in 2019), and Forza Italia (Italy: PM Meloni established..., 2024). Francesco Sismundini, an analyst of electoral surveys, commented on the results: "This confirms the trend that the Italian centre-right is very sensitive to internal leadership changes within the coalition". Andrea Renda, Direct director of research at the Centre for European Policy Studies, noted, "The other parties will realise they are losing consensus the more they stay in power with Fratelli d'Italia" (Italy: PM Meloni established..., 2024). These results have strengthened Giorgia Meloni's position as a potential kingmaker in the European Parliament, sought after by both centrist Ursula von der Leyen and far-right Marine Le Pen for support.

In Germany, Alternative for Germany (AfD) confirmed its status as the second political force after the CDU/CSU alliance in the European Parliament elections in June 2024. AfD received 16% of the votes, which is 5 percentage points higher than in the previous 2019 elections. This significant increase in support occurred despite a series of scandals associated with the party in recent months. The conservative alliance CDU/CSU remained in first place with 30.2% of the votes. One of AfD's national leaders, Tino Chrupalla, called this result "historic" (German conservatives first..., 2024). It is worth noting that AfD's success occurred against the backdrop of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democratic Party achieving its worst result in history, coming in third with 13.9% of the votes. This may lead to further instability within Germany's ruling coalition.

The successes were also demonstrated by other right-wing populists: The Freedom Party of Austria, Poland's Confederation, and Viktor Orban's Hungarian Fidesz. Overall, right and far-right factions in the new composition of the European Parliament (European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy) gained an additional 13 seats, indicating a shift in the political balance to the right (Brause & Kinski, 2024).

These results confirm the trend of increasing popularity of right-wing populists observed in the EU over the past

decade. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, from 2014 to 2024, the overall support for right-wing populist parties in national elections in EU countries has increased from 10% to 22% (Brause & Kinski, 2024).

Unlike the right-wing populists, left-wing populists showed a more mixed dynamic in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Overall, left-wing forces suffered significant losses, reflected in the reduced representation of the Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL (European elections..., 2024).

In Southern Europe, where left-wing populist forces traditionally held strong positions, there was a decrease in support. Spain's Podemos and related regional parties lost votes compared to previous elections. In Central and Northern Europe, left-wing populists also failed to significantly increase their electoral base. Germany's Left party suffered significant losses, partially explained by internal divisions within the party and the creation of the new political movement led by Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). In France, the left-wing coalition NUPES, which includes Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise, also did not replicate its previous success (European elections..., 2024).

The pan-European trend towards a shift to the right has negatively affected the support for left-wing forces. This creates serious challenges for advancing ambitious environmental policies and social reforms at the EU level. At the same time, left-wing parties retain potential influence, especially in issues where the centrist coalition may require additional votes to form a majority. According to experts' estimates, the overall support for left-wing populists in the EU ranges from 10-12%, showing no trend towards growth (European elections..., 2024).

The successes of populist parties, especially on the right wing, are driven by a complex of interconnected factors, including the migration crisis, economic inequality, a crisis of trust in traditional institutions, cultural reactions to globalisation, and geopolitical instability. A detailed analysis of these factors, their descriptions, and relevant statistical data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Key factors driving the popularity of right-wing populist parties in the EU (2015-2024)

Factor	Description	Statistics/Data
Migration Crisis	The mass influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa	Over 5 million refugees and illegal migrants (2015-2023)
Economic Inequality	Stagnation of middle-class incomes	Real incomes for the majority of the EU population have not grown since 2008
Crisis of Trust	Low trust in traditional EU parties and institutions	Nearly six out of ten EU citizens are satisfied with how democracy works in their country (58%) and in the EU (57%)
Cultural Reaction	Perception of immigration as a threat to national culture	58% of Europeans believe immigration undermines national culture
Geopolitical Instability	War in Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East	Increased demand for a "strong hand" and tough foreign policy

Sources: Migration and asylum in Europe – 2023 edition (2023), Income Inequality in the Over-Indebted Eurozone Countries and the Role of the Excessive Deficit Procedure (2023), Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024 (2024)

Summarising the results of the 2024 European Parliament elections, there has been a significant strengthening of positions for right-wing populist parties in many EU countries. As evident from Table 2, this increase in support is driven by a complex of interconnected factors including the migration crisis, economic inequality, declining trust in

traditional institutions, and geopolitical instability. Meanwhile, left-wing populist forces have mostly lost ground or remained at previous levels of support. This trend poses new challenges for European politics, particularly in terms of preserving liberal-democratic values and continuing the course towards deeper European integration.

The impact of populist governments on the functioning of democratic institutions in the EU. In Hungary, where the Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán has been in power since 2010, there has been a consistent curtailment of democratic freedoms. This process began with the adoption of a new Constitution, which significantly expanded the powers of the government at the expense of the parliament and the Constitutional Court. The next step was a judicial reform, culminating in the 2018 law on the creation of a system of administrative courts, directly subordinate to the Minister of Justice. This effectively placed the judicial branch under the control of the executive (Halmai, 2024).

Concurrently, Orbán's government has undertaken to restrict media freedom. As early as 2010, a media regulation law was passed, allowing for tight control over the public broadcaster. Later, in 2017, the so-called "Soros law" was adopted, which significantly restricted the activities of non-governmental organisations and academic freedoms. These consecutive steps created a system in Hungary that critics have labelled an "illiberal democracy", where formal democratic institutions exist but their independence and effectiveness are severely limited. These actions have drawn criticism from the EU and international organisations. In 2018, the European Parliament initiated a procedure under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (Treaty on European Union..., 2020) regarding Hungary for a "clear risk of a serious breach of EU values" (Halmai, 2024).

In Poland, with the rise to power of the Law and Justice party in 2015, a series of reforms began that caused serious concern within the European Union. The first step was the adoption of a law that transferred the authority to appoint the leadership of public media to the government, effectively establishing control over the media landscape. The following year, the government focused on the judicial system, limiting the powers of the Constitutional Tribunal and changing the procedure for electing its judges. This trend continued in 2017 with the adoption of a law that allowed the Minister of Justice to appoint and dismiss court presidents, casting doubt on the independence of the judiciary as a whole (Chiopris & Nalepa, 2024).

These consecutive actions of the Polish government provoked a sharp reaction from the European Commission. Concerns about the systematic undermining of the principle of the rule of law in Poland led to an unprecedented step – in December 2017, the European Commission initiated a procedure under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (Treaty on European Union..., 2020). This decision was a clear signal of the seriousness of the situation and the EU's readiness to protect the fundamental values of democracy and the rule of law, even in relations with its own member states (Chiopris & Nalepa, 2024).

The experience of left-wing populists in power in Southern Europe demonstrates a different approach to governance compared to the right. In Greece, the coalition led by SYRIZA, which came to power in 2015, focused on socioeconomic reforms, avoiding radical changes to the political system. Alexis Tsipras's government gradually implemented measures aimed at improving the situation of workers and vulnerable groups. In 2015, same-sex partnerships were legalised, expanding the rights of the

LGBTQ+ community. The following years were marked by the restoration of collective bargaining agreements and an 11% increase in the minimum wage in 2019. However, SYRIZA faced tough demands from international creditors, forcing the government to make compromises in economic policy, which led to disappointment among some voters (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2019).

A similar trend can be observed in Spain, where the left-wing populist party Podemos joined the coalition government with the Socialists in 2020. During its three years in power, the party achieved some successes in the social sphere: the minimum wage was significantly increased, a progressive euthanasia law was passed, and tenant rights protections were strengthened. However, ideological differences within the coalition and difficulties in implementing the ambitious reform program led to government instability. Ultimately, after a defeat in the 2023 elections, the coalition was forced to resign, highlighting the challenges left-wing populists face in maintaining power in the current political realities of Europe (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2019).

The activities of right-wing populist governments, particularly in Hungary and Poland, have posed serious challenges to the democratic institutions of the European Union. Since the rise to power of the Fidesz and Law and Justice parties in these countries, there has been a systematic undermining of the principle of the rule of law, enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (Treaty on European Union..., 2024). Restrictions on the independence of the judiciary and prosecution have called into question the ability of these states to ensure the effective application of EU law.

In parallel, there has been a violation of freedom of the media and academic freedoms, which contradicts Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (Charter of Fundamental Rights..., 2020). The governments of both countries have established control over public media and limited the autonomy of universities. In addition, there has been a systematic restriction of the rights of the opposition and civil society, undermining the principles of pluralistic democracy.

Particular concern has been raised by the disregard for the decisions of the Court of Justice of the European Union and the recommendations of the Venice Commission, which has undermined the authority of these institutions. These actions have set a dangerous precedent for other countries and threatened the fundamental values of the EU.

In response to these challenges, EU institutions were forced to take unprecedented measures. In 2017, the Article 7 procedure of the Treaty on European Union (Treaty on European Union..., 2020) was launched against Poland, followed by a similar procedure against Hungary the following year. The European Commission also initiated numerous proceedings against these countries before the Court of Justice of the EU for breaches of EU law (Pech *et al.*, 2021). The culmination of these efforts was the introduction in 2020 of a mechanism linking the disbursement of EU funds to compliance with the rule of law. This instrument allowed linking EU funding to adherence to democratic standards, creating a powerful lever of influence on offending countries (Rule of law..., 2020). However, the effectiveness of these measures remains a subject of debate,

as populist governments continue their policies, teetering on the brink of open conflict with Brussels.

The activities of right-wing populist governments pose a direct threat to the rule of law as a fundamental principle of the EU. According to the definition of the Venice Commission, the rule of law entails, *inter alia*, legality, legal certainty, the prohibition of arbitrariness, access to justice, respect for human rights, non-discrimination, and equality before the law (Venice Commission, 2011). This situation creates serious risks for the unity of the EU's legal space. The selective application of EU law and the disregard of the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU undermine the principle of the primacy of EU law over national law, enshrined in the *Costa v ENEL* case (Judgment of the Court..., 1964). This could lead to the fragmentation of the EU's legal order and weaken its integration potential.

At the same time, the activities of left-wing populist governments, such as in Greece or Spain, have not led to similar systemic violations of the rule of law. Their reforms were mostly limited to the socio-economic sphere and did not affect the fundamental principles of democracy. This can be explained by both ideological differences (left-wing populists are less prone to authoritarianism) and the weaker positions of these parties in power (they were usually junior partners in coalitions).

In summary, it can be stated that the activities of populist, especially right-wing, governments pose a serious challenge to democracy and the rule of law in the EU. It undermines the fundamental values of the Union, enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (Treaty on European Union..., 2024), and calls into question the effectiveness of the existing mechanisms for protecting these values.

Discussion

The analysis conducted on the phenomenon of populism in contemporary Europe has revealed its ambivalent nature and multivariate manifestations. In particular, the study demonstrated significant differences between right-wing and left-wing populism in the interpretation of the concept of "the people", the perception of fundamental societal divisions, and approaches to economic policy. At the same time, common structural features of populist movements were identified, such as the opposition of "the people" to the elites and criticism of liberal democracy. An analysis of the electoral successes of populist parties has shown a growth in support for right-wing populists in many EU countries, while left-wing populist forces demonstrate a more ambiguous dynamic. A study of the impact of populist governments on the functioning of democratic institutions has revealed serious challenges to the rule of law in Central and Eastern European countries, but less radical consequences in Southern Europe. These results underscore the complexity and contextuality of the impact of populism on European democracies, indicating the need for a differentiated approach to the analysis of this phenomenon in various national and regional contexts.

The analysis of the ideological foundations of right-wing and left-wing populism in Europe, presented in this study, correlates significantly with the findings of J.E. Fossum (2024). The researcher also notes the fundamental differences between right-wing and left-wing populism

in the interpretation of the concept of "the people" and the perception of the main societal divisions. However, the author emphasises the phenomenon of the "segmentation" of the European political space under the influence of populism, which is a valuable addition to the presented analysis. According to J.E. Fossum (2024), populist movements contribute to the fragmentation of the EU's political landscape, creating new lines of division both between member states and within national political systems. This observation aligns with the trend towards political polarisation identified in this study across many EU countries.

The results of the analysis of the electoral successes of right-wing populist parties, presented in this study, find confirmation in the research of M.W. Svolik *et al.* (2023). The researchers also note a trend towards increasing support for right-wing populists in many EU countries. However, the researchers go further in their conclusions, claiming that "In Europe, democracy erodes from the right". This statement seems somewhat categorical in light of the data presented in this study about the ambiguous impact of right-wing populist governments on democratic institutions. In particular, the experience of Hungary and Poland does indeed demonstrate serious challenges to the rule of law, but the situation in other EU countries is not so unambiguous.

The analysis of the impact of populist governments on the functioning of democratic institutions in the EU, presented in this study, finds an interesting complement to the study of B. Crum & A. Oleart (2023). The researchers propose the concept of "democratic resilience" to assess the ability of political systems to withstand the challenges of populism. This approach allows for a more nuanced assessment of the consequences of populists coming to power, taking into account not only the negative effects but also the potential for a renewal of democratic institutions. Such a perspective is a valuable addition to the analysis presented in this study, which focuses primarily on the negative aspects of the impact of populist governments.

The comparison of right-wing and left-wing populism presented in this study finds interesting parallels in the research of A. Kioupkiolis & G. Katsambekis (2019). The researchers also note fundamental differences between right-wing and left-wing populism in cultural orientations and economic policy. However, their analysis of the experience of SYRIZA and Podemos demonstrates that left-wing populists face significant difficulties in implementing their programs while in power. This observation is consistent with the data presented in this study on the limited successes of left-wing populist governments in Greece and Spain.

The analysis of the factors contributing to the growth in popularity of right-wing populist parties in the EU, presented in this study, finds confirmation in the study of D. Schraff & J. Pontusson (2023). The researchers also highlight the role of economic inequality and cultural reactions against globalisation in the rise of support for right-wing populists. However, the authors emphasise the spatial dimension of these processes, analysing the "economic geographies of right-wing populism". This approach allows for the identification of regional specificities of populist mobilisation, which is a valuable addition to the overall European analysis presented in this study.

The analysis presented in this study of the impact of populist governments on the rule of law in the EU finds an interesting complement to the study of B. Fernández-García & Á. Valencia-Sáiz (2023). The researchers focus on the specificity of populism in Southern Europe, noting that populist movements in this region are less inclined to systematically undermine democratic institutions. This observation aligns with the data presented in this study regarding the differences between the activities of right-wing populist governments in Central and Eastern Europe and left-wing populist governments in Southern Europe.

The analysis of ideological differences between right-wing and left-wing populism presented in this study finds an interesting complement in the research of F.M. Scanni (2023). The researcher offers a comparative analysis of populism and technocracy as two opposing but in some ways similar approaches to governance. This allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of populism and its place in contemporary democratic systems. In particular, F.M. Scanni (2023) notes that both populists and technocrats tend to simplify complex problems and criticise established democratic procedures, albeit from different positions. This observation is a valuable addition to the analysis of the structural features of populism presented in this study.

The analysis presented in this study of the impact of populist parties on the functioning of democratic institutions in the EU finds a complement in the study of B. Crum *et al.* (2023). The researchers propose a conceptual framework for analysing the impact of populist parties on democratic pluralism in Europe. They identify three key dimensions of this impact: institutional, discursive, and behavioural. This approach allows for a more systematic assessment of the consequences of the activities of populist parties, considering not only formal institutional changes but also transformations in political discourse and the behaviour of actors. Such a perspective is a valuable addition to the analysis presented in this study, which focuses primarily on the institutional dimension of the impact of populist governments.

Comparing the results of this study with the studies of other authors allows for identifying both the strengths and weaknesses of the presented analysis. Among the strengths is a comprehensive approach that combines the analysis of the ideological foundations of populism with the study of its electoral successes and impact on democratic institutions. This allows for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of populism in contemporary Europe. It is also worth noting the attention paid to the differences between right-wing and left-wing populism, which allows for avoiding excessive generalisations and taking into account the heterogeneity of populist movements.

At the same time, this study has certain limitations. In particular, the analysis focuses primarily on general European trends, paying less attention to national and regional specificities of populism. This contrasts with the approach of D. Schraff & J. Pontusson (2023), who emphasise the spatial dimension of populist mobilisation. It is also worth noting that the analysis of the impact of populist governments on democratic institutions focuses primarily on negative aspects, paying less attention to the potential for a renewal of democratic systems, as noted by B. Crum & A. Oleart (2023).

In conclusion, it can be stated that the presented study makes a valuable contribution to understanding the phenomenon of populism in contemporary Europe, offering a comprehensive analysis of its ideological foundations, electoral successes, and impact on democratic institutions. At the same time, a comparison with the studies of other authors indicates the need for further research that would take into account the spatial dimension of populist mobilisation, the potential for renewal of democratic systems, and the specificity of populism in different regions of Europe. Such an expanded analysis would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of contemporary European populism.

Conclusions

The conducted study of the phenomenon of right-wing and left-wing populism in the EU and its impact on democratic processes allows the following conclusions to be drawn. The analysis of the essence and characteristic features of contemporary European populism revealed its ambivalent nature and multivariate manifestations. It was established that despite common structural features (opposition of “the people” to the elites, criticism of liberal democracy, a tendency to simplify), right-wing and left-wing populism have significant ideological differences. Right-wing populism is characterised by radical nationalism, xenophobia, Euroscepticism, and conservatism on cultural issues. In contrast, left-wing populism focuses on socio-economic inequality, advocates for expanding the rights of workers, and adheres to progressive values in the cultural sphere. These differences determine the different approaches of right-wing and left-wing populists to solving societal problems and their behaviour in power.

Research into the electoral successes of populist parties in EU countries has revealed a trend of growing support for right-wing populists in many member states. An analysis of the results of the 2024 European Parliament elections demonstrated significant successes for right-wing populist forces in France, Italy, Germany, and other countries. At the same time, left-wing populist parties have largely lost ground or remained at previous levels of support. A complex of interconnected factors has been identified that contribute to the growing popularity of right-wing populists, including the migration crisis, economic inequality, a decline in trust in traditional institutions, and geopolitical instability. These factors create a favourable environment for populist mobilisation, especially on the right flank of the political spectrum.

Analysis of the activities of populist governments has revealed their ambiguous impact on the state of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the EU. It has been established that right-wing populist governments in Central and Eastern European countries, particularly in Hungary and Poland, systematically undermine the principles of the rule of law through restrictions on the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, and the rights of the opposition. This poses serious challenges to the unity of the EU’s legal space and the effectiveness of its democratic mechanisms. In contrast, left-wing populist governments in Southern Europe (Greece, Spain) have focused primarily on socio-economic reforms, without resorting to systematic undermining of democratic institutions. It has

been found that the activities of populist, especially right-wing, governments pose a serious challenge to democracy and the rule of law in the EU, undermining the fundamental values of the Union and calling into question the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for their protection.

In summary, it can be stated that the goal of the research to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of right-wing and left-wing populism in the EU and its impact on the state of democracy and the rule of law has been achieved. The study has revealed the complex and ambiguous nature of populism in contemporary Europe, its ability to take on various ideological forms, and its varying impact on democratic processes depending on the national context and ideological orientation.

The practical significance of the obtained results lies in the possibility of their use to develop more effective strategies to counter the negative consequences of populism for European democracy. In particular, the identified differences between right-wing and left-wing populism indicate the need for a differentiated approach to interacting with different populist forces. Understanding the factors contributing to the growing popularity of populists can help in the

formation of policies aimed at addressing the root causes of this phenomenon. The limitations of this study lie in its predominant focus on general European trends, which did not allow for a full consideration of national and regional specificities of populism. In addition, the analysis of the impact of populist governments on democratic institutions focused primarily on negative aspects, paying less attention to the potential for a renewal of democratic systems.

Future research prospects include analysing the spatial dimension of populist mobilisation, studying the potential of populism for renewing democratic institutions, examining its interaction with other political phenomena, and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies to counter its negative consequences. This will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the nature of contemporary European populism and its impact on democratic processes in the EU.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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