

Geographical Dimensions of Populist Euroscepticism

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Abstract

The appeal of populism has been explained by individual preferences expressed along two dimensions: a left-right economic dimension and a cosmopolitan-traditionalist cultural dimension. However, this distinction has been contested by recent studies pointing out that economic and cultural factors reinforce each other in linking structural transformations, like globalisation and technological change, to populist political outcomes. Given the spatially uneven character of the effects of structural transformations, our contribution argues that ‘place’ should be a central category in the analysis of Eurosceptic populism. By focusing on place, it becomes easier to understand how material and identity-related factors interact in triggering a demand for populism, and how this interaction sets the ground for the reception of populist narratives in different locations. We set out a research agenda for improving our understanding of the political implications of local socio-economic trajectories in Western European left-behind areas, places in Central and Eastern Europe struggling since transition into democracy begun, Southern European locations hit by the Eurozone crisis, and beyond.

Keywords

populism, Euroscepticism, place, socio-economics, identity

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Introduction

The appeal of populism is often explained using models of individual political preferences that are structured along two dimensions: a left-right economic dimension and a cosmopolitan-traditionalist cultural dimension (e.g. Beramendi et al., 2015; Hall and Evans, 2022). However, this distinction has been contested by recent studies pointing out that economic and cultural factors reinforce each other and linking the backlash to structural transformations, like globalisation and technological change, to populist political outcomes (e.g. Gartzou-Katsouyanni et al., 2022; Gidron and Hall, 2017). Given the geographically uneven character of the effects of these structural transformations, our

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contribution argues that ‘place’ is a particularly useful unit of analysis for studies of populist Euroscepticism. The concept of place denotes a set of geographical, material and identity-related factors specific to localities, which mediate how individuals experience and respond to broader socio-economic and political phenomena. By focusing on geographical variation in support for populist Euroscepticism at the subnational level, rather than just on analysing individual preferences or on comparing national cases, it becomes easier to understand how material and identity-related factors interact in triggering a demand for populism, and how this interaction sets the ground for the reception of populist narratives in different locations.

Recent studies (e.g. Cramer, 2016) have advanced our understanding of how local economic trajectories of deindustrialisation and relative economic decline are linked to populist voting outcomes in Western Europe and the US. However, we still know very little about the link between the rise of populism and the varied impact of structural transformations at the subnational level in other regions of the world. Therefore, our contribution sets out a research agenda for improving our understanding of the political implications of local socio-economic trajectories not only in Western European left-behind areas but also in Central-Eastern European regions struggling since transition into democracy began, in Southern European localities hit by the Eurozone crisis, and beyond.

There is a conceptual and methodological link between populism and Euroscepticism. The argument made throughout the volume is that populist Euroscepticism is a particular type of Euroscepticism that adopts populist frames, as opposed to regular criticism towards the European Union (EU; Pirro et al., 2018). The EU has historically been seen as a particularly clear example of how socio-economic conditions ‘make’ populism (Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018). Its governance failures with respect to the Eurozone, the sovereign debt crisis and migration fuelled many grievances across the EU (Algan et al., 2017); they are, however, only one part of the underpinning of such populism. It is the supply of populist ideology along Eurosceptic lines that is a key source of populist Euroscepticism (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Hartevelde et al., 2018; Lorimer, 2021). Euroscepticism has become a political identity predicated on the opposition of the people versus an elite (Pasquinucci, 2022). The cumbersomeness of the European construction lends itself particularly well to that kind of framing (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2020). The EU is seen as being governed by an unelected bureaucracy. This elite then provides a platform that allows for the attribution of responsibility for the actual or perceived malaise (Schlipphack and Treib, 2017). Correspondingly, the process of populist radicalisation along symbolic lines – with respect to language, religion, culture, ethnicity or citizenship – has been proven to take on a decidedly Eurosceptic guise (Bhambra, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). In this article, we hence consistently use the phrase ‘populist Euroscepticism’ to denote the above.

In the next section, we problematise the common conceptualisation of the second dimension of political preferences as cultural and put forward a model of the political space that consists of a left-right dimension and a pro-/anti-globalisation dimension. In the third section, we argue that studying left-behind areas in Western Europe through the lens of place has led to major advances in our understanding of the dynamics of the second dimension of politics and the rise of populist Euroscepticism in those localities. In the fourth section, we outline the limits of existing theories in explaining populist Euroscepticism in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE), and we call for further research on the geographical dimension of the distinct structural transformations that CEE has undergone in recent decades and their link to politics. A conclusion follows.

Economics, Culture and the Second Dimension of Politics

In the post-war period, the cleavages between the centre and the periphery, the primary and secondary sectors, and the Church and State, which had traditionally differentiated the politics of European countries, gradually subsided. The class-based cleavage, which pitted workers against employers and owners, became the main structuring force in politics, and it tended to make European party systems more alike (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). As a result, scholars of comparative politics increasingly relied on a unidimensional, left-right model to locate voter preferences and party positions on the political space (e.g. Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Downs, 1957). In this model, the main issue at the basis of party competition was the degree of income redistribution through taxing, spending and regulatory policies.

In the last two decades, it has become increasingly apparent that this unidimensional model is no longer adequate for analysing European politics. A second dimension of political conflict has been cutting across traditional party lines, causing rifts within established parties and leading to the rise of new parties that mobilise distinct coalitions based on novel political agendas. Several accounts of this second dimension of politics have been put forward (e.g. Beramendi et al., 2015; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Hooghe et al., 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Despite their differences, a unifying theme in most of these accounts is that they consider the nature of the political conflict that underlies the second dimension of politics as cultural or identity based, as opposed to traditional class conflict, which has an economic basis. Viewed from this angle, ‘radical Right’ and ‘Right-populist parties’ are seen as reacting against ‘a series of perceived threats to the national community’, including ‘immigrants, foreign cultural influences, cosmopolitan elites, and international agencies’ (Hooghe et al., 2002: 976).

However, a growing literature challenges the usefulness of the distinction between economic and cultural preferences, which lies at the foundation of many contemporary two-dimensional models of the political space. Indicatively, Gidron and Hall (2017) argue that preferences for radical right parties result from losses in social status, combining economic and cultural explanations for populism. Kitschelt and Rehm (2019) show that in the 2016 US election, socio-economic groups that were most affected or threatened by economic decline also tended to respond to more racist appeals. Jennings and Stoker (2019) argue that a new divide has emerged in British politics, pitting British cities that are integrated and prospering in the globalised knowledge economy against towns and rural areas that have faced a loss of jobs in traditional industries, a degradation of infrastructural provision, and a decrease in their young, highly educated population. This political divide has both economic and cultural underpinnings, and it is counterproductive to attempt to isolate the one from the other. Based on fieldwork in post-industrial areas in the UK, Gartzou-Katsouyanni et al. (2022) link narratives of nostalgic pride to the loss of traditional industries. They also argue that anti-immigration sentiments ‘can be construed as a reaction against the trajectory of declining social mobility and the increasingly dominant position of low-value-added business models within local economies’ (Gartzou-Katsouyanni et al., 2022: 16). Nevertheless, despite recognising that ‘the boundaries between distributional (economic) and identity-based (cultural) conflicts have become increasingly blurred’ (Gartzou-Katsouyanni et al., 2022: 202), scholars like Häusermann and Kriesi (2015: 204, 207) still distinguish between an ‘economic’ and a ‘cultural-identitarian dimension’ of political conflict. Similarly, Rovny and Polk (2019) analyse the dimensional structure of European party systems based on an ‘economic’ and a

‘noneconomic’ or ‘cultural’ dimension of politics. In their recent analysis of long-term changes in the political attitudes of occupational groups, Hall and Evans (2022: 14) also adopt a two-dimensional model of electoral space that distinguishes between parties’ and individuals’ ‘economic position’ (x-axis) and ‘cultural position’ (y-axis).

Instead, we find it more helpful to think about the evolution of the structure of the political space in terms of the rise of a new cleavage, which pits the winners of globalisation and the transition to the knowledge economy against those who have lost out from these structural changes. This cleavage has both economic and cultural manifestations. Given the interconnections between the two, we find it more productive to analyse how the economic and cultural reactions to the transition to a globalised knowledge economy relate to each other in specific contexts, rather than attempting to isolate the two. After all, in Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) initial analysis of the cleavage structure of politics, all historically documented cleavages had economic as well as cultural aspects, even if some cleavages had a more prominent interest-based dimension while others leaned more heavily on the identitarian side. Characteristically, the urban–rural cleavage in late nineteenth-century England was underpinned by ‘a hard core of economic conflict’ between landed and industrial interests, but it also ‘reflected an opposition between two value orientations: the recognition of status through ascription and kin connections versus the claims for status through achievement and enterprise’ (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967: 19). Even the class-based cleavage has an identitarian dimension, which varies depending on the national context. In Greece, which, like Spain and Portugal, experienced a right-wing dictatorship in the post-war period, left-wing parties have been historically associated not only with the representation of the interests of lower socio-economic strata, but also with resistance against authoritarianism and foreign intervention in domestic politics. This cultural dimension of the left-right conflict must be considered when explaining why populist Euroscepticism in Greece manifested itself mostly on the Left during the Eurozone crisis (Gartzou-Katsouyanni, 2020).

Thus, we adopt a model of the political space that distinguishes between a class-based and a globalisation dimension of politics, recognising that both dimensions have economic and cultural aspects. In terms of economics, the forces of globalisation and tertiarization have affected most parts of the world in recent decades, and we expect that they will produce similar political tendencies in areas with a similar economic structure and history. We expect a greater degree of spatial variation on the cultural aspect of the globalisation dimension, reflecting the diverse ways in which different localities and countries have related to foreign powers historically.

Studying Populist Euroscepticism in Western Europe Through the Lens of Place

The effects of globalisation have been spatially uneven: some areas have been able to fully participate in the globalised knowledge economy and have thrived economically, while others have seen their traditional industries decline and have struggled to identify new economic opportunities (Beer et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose and Crescenzi, 2008). As a result, the transition to the globalised, post-industrial economy has been accompanied by a ‘major new phase of geographically divergent development’ (Martin et al., 2021: 30) at the subnational level. In the UK, two modes of growth are currently being observed: first, ‘a highly concentrated type of high-knowledge growth’ that exploits agglomeration economies and is observed in cities; and second, ‘a more distributed and spatially

dispersed type of growth', which occurs in towns and rural areas. Both modes of growth are highly selective in terms of location and concentrate resources in places with 'better residential environments, more educated workforces and better transport connectivity' (Martin et al., 2021: 55–57). Scholarship on the local and regional causes of spatially divergent trajectories of economic growth point to the importance of factors as diverse as patterns of local knowledge exchange, the strength of social capital and the quality of local institutions (Keating, 2012).

Given the spatially uneven effects of globalisation, focusing on 'place' can help improve our understanding of the relation between the backlash against globalisation and populist Euroscepticism. The concept of place combines three aspects (Agnew and Duncan, 1989; Beer et al., 2020; Cresswell, 2004). First, it refers to an area's physical location and its geographical characteristics, such as, for example, its proximity to the national capital or to trade routes and its urban, suburban or rural character. Second, the concept includes an area's material characteristics (captured by the notion of *locale*), such as buildings, public spaces and other constitutive elements of the physical setting in which social interactions occur. Third, the concept entails the notion of the sense of place, which refers to people's subjective emotional attachment to the area they inhabit, including their feelings of belonging, the stories that they tell about their community, and the meaning that they attribute to local experiences of economic change. The three aspects of place both influence and are influenced by the economic trajectory of the subnational region in question.

The geographical, material and identitarian factors linked to place mediate the way in which individuals experience broader structural transformations, and thus, influence their political preferences, including their demand for populist Euroscepticism. The rising significance of place for the study of populist Euroscepticism is partly due to the consequences of growing spatial inequality on individuals' income, but it also stems from sociotropic effects: people are likely to have more negative views about globalisation and 'related internationalizing policies, such as higher immigration' if they live in communities that have lost out from integration in the global economy, than if they reside in places that have flourished through international trade (Ansell, 2019: 180). One reason is that the prosperity of one's community affects individual interests not only through the size of one's income, but also through other mechanisms, such as local house prices (Ansell, 2019; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). A second reason is that as the economy is becoming less predictable, people increasingly rely on heuristics to understand the changes they observe and make predictions (Bronk and Jacoby, 2020). These heuristics are influenced by local experiences: people tend to interpret facts 'in relation to their own lives and with attention to their immediate social context' (Fitzgerald, 2018: 756). For example, variables such as local foreclosure rates, local unemployment and even local gas prices influence people's perceptions about the state of the national economy beyond what their individual characteristics would predict (Reeves and Gimpel, 2012). More broadly, even if uniform messages are emitted through mass communication channels, the reception of those messages depends on interpretation, and the frames of reference that people use vary across places (Agnew and Duncan, 1989), which act as 'centres of meaning' (Cresswell, 1996: 13). Methodologically, these observations call for complementing studies of voting behaviour based on individual-level survey data with analyses that use data on local economic trajectories, as well as with ethnographic work on the mechanisms that link those trajectories and political preferences.

Indeed, a growing number of such analyses have enriched our knowledge about the demand for populism that is associated with the backlash against globalisation in left-behind areas of Western Europe and the US. Cramer's (2016) *Politics of Resentment* addresses the puzzling electoral success of Scott Walker, who served as Republican Governor for 8 years in Wisconsin, even though many people in that state would have benefitted from stronger government services than he advocated. Cramer explains Walker's appeal through reference to a rural, place-based identity accompanied by mistrust and resentment towards the urban 'liberal elite', whose lack of understanding of rural values and ways of life is perceived as a key reason for relative economic deprivation in the countryside. Recent studies of post-industrial areas highlight the significance of the erosion of community institutions, which followed the decline of traditional industries, for the political expression of attachment to one's community through demand for populism (Fitzgerald, 2018; McQuarrie, 2017). As contemporary, low value-added forms of economic activity fail to fill the gap left by the hollowing out of traditional working class identities, pride in the local community is increasingly expressed in nostalgic terms, creating a fertile ground for populist discourses to resonate (Gartzou-Katsouyanni et al., 2022). The disappearance of local socio-cultural hubs such as community pubs in left-behind areas further contributes to support for radical right parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) (Bolet, 2021). Future research on the territorial dimension of the demand for populism in advanced economies could explore how the backlash against globalisation differs in areas with similar economic histories, which vary in terms of their contemporary export orientation, sectoral composition and business ownership structure.

The Riddle of Populist Euroscepticism in Central-Eastern Europe

As evidenced by case study contributions on Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and former East Germany, in this issue, CEE has also been a playground for populist Eurosceptic mobilisation that is hard to explain using conventional analytical tools. On one hand, the traditional left-right economic dimension of political preferences has distinct resonances in CEE due to the legacy of communism and the post-communist transition. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan-traditionalist cultural explanations have a tough time accounting for robust nationalism alongside favourable perceptions of the European project (Ash, 2010; Król, 2012). The recent geographical turn in the populism literature can help us advance our understanding of populist Euroscepticism in CEE, but this requires further research on the geographically uneven effects of the specific structural transformations in CEE in recent decades. Unlike left-behind areas in advanced capitalist democracies, most regions in CEE have had an upwards economic trajectory for the past three decades since the demise of authoritarian state socialism, in large part thanks to EU integration (Mann, 2015; Piatkowski, 2019; Prochniak, 2011; Žuk and Savelin, 2018). However, the discontents of the rapid transition to a capitalist and then a globalised (Europeanised) economy have been spatially uneven. The 'backlash against the technocratic elites of transition was inevitable once the public began to experience the hardships of transition' (Stanley, 2017). Furthermore, the resulting material inequality has been met with identity-related factors (Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016; Verovšek, 2021), centred around the regionally unevenly distributed erosion of community due to outward migration drain and existential anxiety vis-à-vis accelerating globalisation, which triggered a demand for populism (Holmes and Krastev, 2020).

When it comes to the left-right economic explanations of populist mobilisation, the unevenly distributed growth across the regions of CEE underscores the need for localised approaches. CEE went through a series of marketisation reforms (privatisation, deregulation, liberalisation) in the early 1990s that resulted in deindustrialisation, mass unemployment and political volatility (Grzymala-Busse, 2017). What ensued was the return of class as a social reality for CEE societies and subsequently as an analytical category in social research (Domański, 2000; Ost, 2015; Tomescu-Dubrow et al., 2018). This has been particularly true of Poland, where rapid social stratification, due to income inequality, has been fuelling the flames of populism, especially since 2015, even though rhetorically, the political conflict seems to have been fought along ethno-nationalist lines (Bukowski and Novokmet, 2021; Sierakowski and Sadura, 2023). Yet, both the bold project of liberal democracy, and the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of CEE countries, endured and the region had not descended into populism, as it had been once feared (Markowski, 1997; Przeworski, 1991), despite several populist challenger political parties appearing in subsequent elections. Furthermore, as argued by Toplišek (2020), when populist parties had gained power in CEE in the first two decades post transition, they still pursued traditionally liberal macroeconomic policies expected by international financial institutions and the market. Still, many analyses have put emphasis on the economic underpinning of populism, particularly seen as a backlash against discontents of neo-classical modes of economic governance (Berman, 2021; Innes, 2017; Zielonka, 2018). Yet, despite the plausibility of the explanations focusing on economic grievances, there is little evidence of this taking place on the individual level – one’s economic circumstances do not readily translate into one’s inclination to vote for populists (Mijs and Gidron, 2019). Likewise, populist mobilisation is not evenly distributed across national cases in CEE with considerable regional variable at play, studied mostly from the economic vantage point (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Dusková, 2023; Herodowicz et al., 2021; Kevický, 2022). Consequently, a more holistic analysis of the regional level with respect of populist Euroscepticism is a logical area of future research.

With respect to the socio-cultural explanations, scholars point to the supply of nationalist ideology by political entrepreneurs as key (Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016; Stanley, 2017; Toplišek, 2020; Verovšek, 2021). Yet, we find that while levels of nationalism in the region are comparatively high, they do not always correlate with Euroscepticism. Negative perceptions of the European project do not correspond with the successes of populism (as argued by Styczyńska in this volume). Still, the EU, with its complex decision-making structures, increasing interpenetration of its economies, but limited problem-solving capacity, provides an ideal framework for populist claims that the citizens have lost control of their own country and that the elite is leading the country in even more uncertainty. Furthermore, as found by Vasilopoulou and Zur (2022), it is the salience of European integration as an issue that determines the electoral success of far-right parties. In CEE, the issue of Europe had been discursively linked to other high-salience issues, especially to the influx of migrants and refugees, as well as gender and sexuality debates (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 2016). The geographical lens we adopt can help us understand if those debates have any links to geographically uneven economic transformations and geopolitical pressures, as it has been the case of Poland’s infamous ‘LGBT-free zones’ that have been enacted by local councils since 2019 at the behest of the central government (Korolczuk, 2020; Płoszka, 2023). Most of them have been swiftly countered by grassroots campaigns and eventually withdrawn thanks to European Commission’s insistence on the human rights conditionality of structural funding.

A dominant mode of explaining populist Euroscepticism in CEE centres on the study of supply-side radicalisation of the populist discourse as key to electoral success (Hegedüs, 2019). Populist parties in the region have often adopted a nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-establishment stance, which has resonated with many voters who feel disillusioned with the political establishment and the failure of mainstream parties to address their material concerns. The discussed dissatisfaction of voters is explained by decreasing trust in the democratic system, rather than just in response to economic indicators. Holmes and Krastev (2020) make an argument that that resentment against liberal democracy is due to the 30 years of the age of imitation of democracy in region rebelling against the supremacy of liberalism. Populism is seen as backlash against a world lacking ideological alternatives catalysed a response underwritten by xenophobia and nativism. However, this argument fails to account for intra-regional and intra-national variation in the region.

Given recent growth trajectories in the region, the rise of populist Euroscepticism in CEE is clearly also not the result of ‘the revenge of the places that don’t matter’ because they lost their former affluence (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Nevertheless, a geographical approach can help illuminate how the distinctive structural transformations that CEE localities have paved the ground for the appeal of populist discourses. Thus, where ‘conservative developmental statism’ (Bluhm and Varga, 2020) has been the result of populist governance in CEE, the place should be a central category in the analysis of the phenomenon. Economic conditions need to be analysed side-by-side with existential anxieties in society (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022), accounting for the breakdown of the economic and social fabric, as well as the discourses that create and/or reinforce these perceptions.

Conclusion and Outlook

A recent literature that analyses the backlash against globalisation in left-behind areas by focusing on the interplay between economic and cultural factors in specific places has highlighted the importance of geography in contemporary political divisions and has contributed in important ways to our understanding of populist Euroscepticism in the Western Europe. In this contribution, we have argued that a research approach focusing on place also has the potential to help address a range of puzzles about variation in the appeal of populist Euroscepticism in CEE, which has undergone momentous structural transformations with spatially uneven effects since the late 1980s.

Similar arguments can also be made about regions that have witnessed a rise in populism but have experienced distinct socio-economic trajectories than both deindustrialising areas in Western and Central-Eastern European countries. For instance, Southern European countries enjoyed major economic booms in the 2000s upon adopting the Euro, but later faced major recessions in the 2010s, which were followed by austerity policies and, in the case of Greece, Portugal and Cyprus, externally imposed economic adjustment programmes. How did geographical variation in the economic incidence of the booms of the 2000s, the crises of the 2010s and austerity affect the appeal of populist Euroscepticism at the subnational level in Southern European countries? In a context of uncertainty about the effects of a potential exit from the Euro (Jurado et al., 2020), did voters’ proximate economic experiences influence the way in which they estimated the likely costs and benefits of exiting the common currency? How did the degree of economic pain experienced by specific areas interact with cultural frames of the crisis such as resistance against foreign interference (Vasilopoulou, 2018)? Such questions demonstrate the rich potential

for further advancing the nascent research agenda on the geographical dimension of populist Euroscepticism by analysing political discontent through the lens of place in a variety of regions.

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