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INFO FLASH
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DEFENCE POPULISM: THE FIXATION ON SOVEREIGNTY AND ITS EFFECTS ON SECURITY AND INTEROPERABILITY
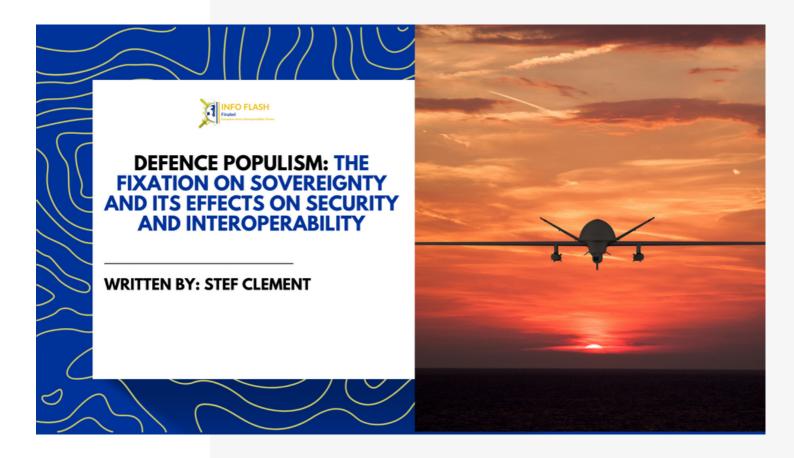
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Introduction

Right-wing populists are increasingly competing for government participation, occasionally with success. Austria, Finland, Sweden, Hungary, Italy and Poland are just a few examples of European Union (EU) Member States that have seen populist parties as part of the governing coalition in recent years (Destradi *et al.*, 2021, p. 663). While this kind of politics often seems far from military operations and their technical nature, they determine the resources and attention given to them. Populists often find other priorities than multilateral defence cooperation (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). This is particularly concerning at a time when European security is under threat. Less military support for Ukraine may, for example, directly affect the security situation in the rest of Europe.

This paper adapts the following definition of 'populism', in line with Müller (2016): populism is the use of anti-elitist and anti-pluralist rhetoric to achieve political ends. While the former focuses on the repulsion of the 'EU elite', through the latter populists claim that 'they, and they alone, represent the people' (Müller, 2016, p. 3). Regardless, it is always a form of identity politics. In line with Müller (2016), 'defence populism' is defined as using populist frames regarding defence matters. It is important to note that projected anti-pluralism may coincide with nationalism (Breeze, 2018). Populists tend to envision security in nationalistic terms. Multilateralism is often reputed as cosmopolitan and sovereignty-infringing. Any limitations to national sovereignty are opposed, prioritising self-governance (Jenne, 2021, pp. 325-328).

This Info Flash will investigate *the impact of right-wing populism in EU Member States on defence and security matters, particularly on interoperability*. To achieve this, I will first analyse the existing literature on defence populism. After that, these findings will be synthesised, tying them to EU security policies and the interoperability of land forces. At last, concluding remarks shall be made.

What Has Been Said

Importantly, recent research shows that many populist parties do not entirely rule out the possibility of some form of international cooperation. In fact, they often prefer military solutions to security problems (Henke & Maher, 2021). However, they differ from non-populist parties in how they frame security matters. Jenne (2021, pp. 325-329) finds that the use of identity appeals, be it ethnic, political-ideological or combined, in formulating their goals. These goals determine the 'us', who they represent, and 'them', who they defy.

In practice, populist parties often lack a uniform perception of external security threats (Henke & Maher, 2021). Together with other factors, such as geography and history, this contributes to the diverging responses in EU Member States. In their study, Ivaldi and Zakina (2023) underscore these variations in responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Many avoided being too closely associated with Putin and toned down their rhetoric around Ukrainian refugees to not alienate their voter base. Populists in most Member States, including France, Denmark, Germany and the Czech Republic, emphasise the socioeconomic consequences, burdening 'the people' and businesses through inflation and high energy prices (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). They also stress the effects of Ukrainian refugees on society. In an event at the Centre for European Policy Studies, European Commission Vice President Věra Jourová supports this narrative by referring to populists targeting Ukrainian refugees by using an 'us vs them' narrative to foster support among voters (Russack *et al.*, 2023).

However, Finnish populist parties have adopted a pro-Ukraine stance and endorsed the country's NATO membership, while in Lithuania, right-wing populism is (temporarily) muted (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023, pp. 126-139, pp. 210-221). Hungary cultivated ties with Putin while expressing reservations about EU action in favour of Ukraine, blaming the EU for domestic economic troubles (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023, pp. 168-185).

Nonetheless, Hawkins *et al*. (2018) see populism as a 'thin-centred ideology': coherent but narrow in ideas and beliefs. Security and defence may be partly isolated from ideology. Dividing security into material and non-material concerns (LeRiche & Opitz, 2019), populist parties tend to focus on the latter, which includes society, the way of life and identity. The former, which includes military, economic and geographic aspects, is often excluded or inferior. Populists are inclined to prioritise a different means to an end compared to non-populist parties.

Implications on EU Security and Interoperability

'"Sovereignty" is probably the term that most accurately captures the populist logic of international affairs' (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 674). 'Sovereigntism', a combination of populism and nationalism, can be seen throughout populist interactions (Jenne, 2021). Henke's and Maher's (2021) research finds that populist parties are 'either strongly opposed [to] or highly sceptical of' defence cooperation within the EU framework, as this means transferring decision-making powers to the European level. However, they remain open to some level of intergovernmental cooperation, whereby they can retain the authority to decide (Henke & Maher, 2021, p. 401).

We can observe this in the European Parliament and at the national level in the Member States. In a parliamentary debate on the future of the EU's Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, right-leaning political groups firmly oppose a strong European response and the creation of a 'super European state' (Mariani, 2022). They hereby structurally highlight national interests and their citizens' harm (Zimniok, 2022). This reasoning can likewise be found with Member States. For example, while Poland's government supports NATO cooperation, it tends to disagree with supranational collaboration under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) framework when it limits its decision-making powers (Zaborowski, 2018).

It is complicated to determine the effects of these arguments. Populists view security through an inherently national lens. So, while they do acknowledge the importance of European security and collective efforts, this will always be a function to achieve national ends. For instance, in a scenario where Poland perceived security as broader than solely national, they may have been more committed to European interaction. Their $13.7 billion arms deal with South Korea last year may be an indication of that (Lee & Smith, 2023). European defence shall, in the end, require a European industry, ensuring interoperability from the beginning. While this does not leave room for partnerships with allies, it risks worsening an already fragmented military-industrial complex (Persson, 2023).

The same holds for the consequences for security. Commission Vice President Jourová sees the rise of populism as a threat to the support for Ukraine since the parties that genuinely support Ukraine will suffer relative losses in the form of financial and military backing. Ultimately, this will increase the likelihood of prolonging the conflict, threatening the security of other European states with it (Russack et al., 2023). Although these effects may be difficult to prove, European security and defence can hardly be successfully achieved by each country pursuing its individual interests as a priority without considering collective goals. With threats broadening and intensifying, ranging from cyber to energy, national efforts may not suffice.

The future

While it is difficult to determine the concrete effects of populism on European security, 'sovereigntism' has the possibility to subdue the development of a unified European defence and joint security initiatives, especially when they limit Member States' sovereignty over decision-making. Generally, Youngs (2017) asks whether further developments at the EU level are even desirable. Increasing the EU's own defence budget may fuel popular mistrust in the EU without mending the Union's democratic and accountability measures (Youngs, 2017).

This all comes at a time when the collective response of EU Member States has become more crucial than ever. A fragmentation resulting from each country pursuing its interests independently may risk leaving common vulnerabilities unaddressed, such as problems in defence interoperability (Persson, 2023). Consequently, this year's national elections in Slovakia, Luxembourg, Poland and the Netherlands, or the European elections in June 2024, might reveal a shifting position or approach, and only time will tell how to interpret these challenges.

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