

Editorial

Once again, a spectre is haunting us, this time by no means only in Europe. The complaint about rampant populism goes hand in hand with the reference to a social cohesion that is endangered in the long term. One immediately feels invited to ask from which position the threat appears to be particularly serious. However, one is soon left confused: liberals bemoan the threat to (parliamentary) democracy and the market economy; leftists see the cause rather in neo- or ultra-liberalism, which is widening the gap between rich and poor ever further; from the point of view of ethno-national thinking, it is above all migration and the advance of lifestyles that do not seem to fit the nation that threaten cohesion. The Chinese Communist Party is equally opposed to the corruption of economic and bureaucratic elites who have become too rich too quickly and to the insubordination of subjects who behave in an undisciplined manner, which is why a point system is supposed to ensure cohesion-friendly good behavior. This system has only the format of points in common with the Canadian technique of assigning scores for immigrant suitability, but otherwise rests on completely different ideological foundations. As this issue impressively demonstrates with examples from southern Africa, the debate about social cohesion extends to the most diverse parts of the world and is based on completely contradictory traditions of discourse: In the Cape, it is about the disappointed hopes of a rainbow nation after the abolition of apartheid, which was accompanied by one of the last acts of decolonization in the larger region, but has not led to the dreamed-of egalitarian and prosperous society in Namibia and Zimbabwe either. This explains why racialized inequalities can be increasingly politicized - primarily between whites and coloured people, of course, but racism clearly does not stop at the infamous colour line drawn in colonial times, as the violent attacks against Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa demonstrate. Populism, in many configurations around the world, forms an unholy alliance with racism and xenophobia, and Southern Africa is no exception. Former US President Donald Trump's "Americans First" slogan has provided a cue that has since been seized upon by many populist imitators and has helped recruit a mass base because envy of the little that others who are socially disprivileged possess or can claim is particularly easy to mobilize in times of substantial crisis and constraint.

It now stands to reason that the bundles of causes for such crises should be identified primarily in national, regional, and local contexts. A wide variety of studies on the rise of populisms in different world regions have gathered impressive material for this purpose,

showing the enormous flexibility of populist politicians and campaigners to generate polarization from a wide variety of occasions, building on social discontent and pushing many political systems to the limits of functioning. What seems to be common is the juxtaposition of “people” and “elites”, which echoes old motifs of criticism of liberalism. Populists claim to speak for these “people”, who are otherwise screwed over. To this end, they hold out the prospect of unmasking the elites and promise that everything will be better under their rule.

But does this old figure of thought explain why populism has been able to become so successful in so many different places at the same time in recent years? Two lines of research proceed from this assumption: one describes (quite rightly) the exacerbation of social inequalities or cultural grievances that go hand in hand with unequal opportunities for participation. The others consider these very slights and a lack of political education to be the leading cause to be addressed. Ethnic affiliations, differently motivated clientelism, lack of insight into the functioning of political systems and much more are tested to explain the growing following of populist movements, which themselves usually not only have little to promise when it comes to overcoming social inequality, but actually promise little as well. Instead, however, they highly emotionalize the political and thus incite and exploit anger about the many unsolved problems.

If we consider only these elements of the many populisms we can observe worldwide, we are indeed left with the impression of a thin ideology, as Cas Mudde has put it. Beyond that, however, two characteristics seem important for contemporary populism.

Whereas older research assumed that only one part of the world was ever covered by populist movements in a given historical period, there is now a broad consensus that populism is an almost worldwide phenomenon, albeit with very different manifestations and contexts. However, these movements do not emerge independently of each other; instead, they refer to, learn from, and support each other (in their election campaigns, in joint parliamentary work for example within the EU, through cross-border funding, and in the further development of their ideological foundations). This part of the transnational quality of populism, which initially appears counter-intuitive in movements that rely so heavily on national sovereignty, has been little explored and deserves further attention.

At the same time, individual populist movements are united by more than occasional bilateral and multilateral relationships and organizational efforts to effectively coordinate their forces. Instead, a clear commonality emerges in the (negative) reference to the obviously failed globalization ideology of the 1990s and 2000s, which was driven by the conviction that victory in the Cold War would establish a permanent hegemony of the liberal camp. Globalism as an enemy image is found in almost all populist movements and is increasingly developing into a brand core from which anti-liberal, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic resentments can be fed – in very different mixes depending on the context. This makes populism and the efforts to re-found social cohesion in response to it a topic of global history that is more than an ephemeral reaction to the excitements of contemporary diagnostics.

Matthias Middell