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THE 'BRUSSELS BUBBLE': POPULISM IN SLOVENIA IN THE EU CRISES CONTEXT

Abstract. *The focus of this article is on the rise of populism and Euroscepticism in the context of the crisis of liberal internationalism and of the EU in particular. The article considers the view that the weak integration of Slovenian–EU politics makes the country vulnerable to this trend. Modern-nationalist, postmodern-cosmopolitan and faux-modern-partially modernised variations of populism are explored. The research draws on public opinion surveys, party manifestos, focus groups with party supporters, and interviews with mediators in elite and popular debates. The dominant modern economist/functionalist view of the EU is shown to have fed into different framings in line with the underlying thick ideologies. On the right, this has been a retro-modern nationalist reaction to the EU's overly progressive policy and polity, with certain illiberal faux-modern elements like authoritarianism and ethno cultural exclusivism. On the left, it has reinforced the already existing contradictions with (neo)liberalism on the level of politics, leaving the post-modern post-nationalist framing detached from the EU's polity and policy. The article offers some proposals for better integrating the EU politics in Slovenia.*

Keywords: *EU, Euroscepticism, populism, illiberalism, Slovenia, public opinion, political parties*

Introduction: from a 'permissive consensus' to the 'Brussels bubble'

The liberal international order's internal antagonisms seen in the global economic and financial crisis coupled with shifts in the international system like the rise of China and a more assertive Russia have led to a crisis in the liberal international order, peaking with Donald Trump's victory at the US

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elections. Global crises have also triggered specific crises in the EU, being the most successful embodiment of the liberal internationalism, such as the Eurozone and migration crisis, Brexit, and the rise of illiberal democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Among post-socialist transition countries, Slovenia was hailed as a front-runner in the Euroatlantic integration, which first required that it adopt liberal democratic norms and institutions (Bojinović and Svetličič, 2017). In the context of considerable public support for the EU, the successful ‘downloading of the *acquis*’ gave the domestic elites an important source of legitimacy (Lajh, 2012: 144). Following the global and EU crises, the decline in EU support and rise of populism have challenged the pattern of the (apparently) successful Europeanisation and democratisation (Bojinović and Svetličič, 2017; Djurovic and Lajh, 2020: 674).

The aim of this article is to explore how the crisis of liberal internationalism and the crisis in the EU regarding the rise of populism and Euroscepticism have impacted Slovenia. The article considers the argument that the permissive consensus and weak politicisation make Slovenia vulnerable to the rise of both populism and Euroscepticism, as captured by the term ‘Brussels bubble’ (Lajh and Novak, 2020). Existing research into anti-establishment politics in the context of modern internationalisation/globalisation processes acts as a starting point (Polajner and Lukšič, 2020; Putzel, 2020; Miller, 2021). The modern-nationalist, postmodern-post nationalist and faux-modern-partially integrated forms of populism (Fink-Hafner, 2019) are explored in the Slovenian (post-)EU crises context.

Below, we elaborate on populism and the associated typologies and how it relates to the liberal internationalism and Euroscepticism in the global and EU crises context. Attention is paid to the position held by the CEE region and Slovenia. In the empirical part, we explore the demand- and supply-side dynamics in Slovenia by considering opinion polls and studies of Eurosceptic and populist parties. This is followed by a presentation of the results of focus groups (FG) that included supporters of right- and left-wing Eurosceptic and populist parties, and interviews with opinion poll experts, civil society representatives, and journalists who mediate between elite and popular views. In the conclusion, we summarise the findings and note some policy implications.

Conceptual framework: populism in the context of the crises of liberal internationalism and in the EU

Populism has been defined as an ideology, discourse or rhetoric that focuses on “pure people vs a corrupted elite” and by being “thin centered” does not entail a fully-fledged vision of the world and can mix with various

“thick” ideologies (radical right or radical left) (Mudde, 2004: 543, Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 5; Taggart, 2002, Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 255–256). Populism has supported the politicisation of various “apolitical” issues and thereby contributed to a sense of inclusion and democratisation. On the other hand, its absolute view of the “general will” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 18) and antagonising discourse of “us versus them” (Müller, 2016: 19, 42) has contradicted the concept of pluralism associated with a modern liberal democracy. The de-institutionalisation tendencies involved in populism have often been linked with the role of strong leaders directly accountable to the people, bringing the risk of authoritarian rule (Mudde, 2004: 545; Fukuyama, 2017: 10–11; Fuentes, 2020: 51).

Throughout history, globalisation processes have been related with popular movements against the established classes (which were seemingly benefitting from those processes) (Chryssogelos, 2020: 23–24; Vampa, 2020: 309–310). These started with the pre-modern opposition to state-led centralisation, followed by modern-nationalist reactions to the internationalisation pressures on different socioeconomic groups, the postmodern cosmopolitan critique of the politics of nation states and faux-modern movements characterised by partial modernisation and the ongoing role of pre-modern forms of governance (Fink-Hafner, 2019: 31–33).

The recent popular backlash has to do with the globalisation wave underway since the 1980s. The hegemonic role of the Atlantic order and the liberal internationalism facilitated the transfer of sovereignty to international institutions by national liberal-reformist elites to gain a lever against blocking domestic interest groups. It altered the distributional functions of the state and created new global “winner” and “loser” groups (Goodhart and Bondanella, 2011; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017: 9; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018: 1674). According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 116), the “popular sovereignty” movement was an “illiberal democratic response to the undemocratic liberalism”. In the Global South, economic pressures by international capital supported left-wing populism while, in the Global North, right-wing populism has prevailed due to its successful uptake of perceived migration pressures on the welfare state and identity (Brubaker, 2017: 366–370, 379; Rodrik, 2021: 135–140). Internal crises of the liberal international order and power shifts within the international system added to the distributional tensions and instability and created opposition to the norms and rules imposed by international institutions, e.g. in trade or human rights, and supported the rise of strongmen (Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Nye, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018: 7; Colgan, 2019: 85–87). The “governance-representation gap” (Chryssogelos, 2017) fed into rejection of the “internationalist state” and the return of the retro-modern “sovereign state” (Chryssogelos, 2020).

European integration was conceived to help member states better cope

with globalisation pressures. Yet, in the post 1980s context, it was also regarded as a proponent of globalism. According to Krastev (2007; 2012), the EU was increasingly seen as a “policy without politics on the EU level and politics without policy on the member state level” where “the elites were increasingly suspicious towards democracy and the public was becoming increasingly hostile to liberalism”. The EU crises that initially arose from external shocks revealed specific dysfunctionality of the EU in terms of “one size fits none” policies (e.g. the Eurozone) and “joint decision-making traps” (e.g. migration), while also boosting Euroscepticism (Pirro and van Kessel, 2017: 406–407; Stengel, 2019: 2). The literature identified two types of Euroscepticism: the ‘hard’ version of outright and unqualified rejection and the ‘soft’ version of contingent and qualified opposition to the European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2001; Taggart, 2002; Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 256).

CEE and Slovenia

Researchers argue the CEE countries are particularly exposed to the rise of populism and Euroscepticism because their Euro-Atlantic integration and politico-economic transformation followed an elite apolitical pattern with expert politicians in the centre, and decisions imposed from above (Korkut, 2012; Petrović et al., 2021). Implementation of the liberal paradigm was often artificial and/or poorly accommodated to local needs. EU accession led to disenchantment with democracy (Rupnik, 2007), with dissenting voices from the onset characterised by a “pure anti-establishment appeal” (Učeň, 2007). The global and EU crises of liberal internationalism resulted in the loss of international ‘superregulatory’ centre of authority while sustaining and even increasing asymmetric dependencies and negative effects in the CEE (Lovec, 2019; Lovec and Bojinović Fenko, 2020; Lovec et al., 2021). The weak and underdeveloped institutions created an opportunity for authoritarian forms to rise (Bugarič and Ginsburg, 2016), such as “illiberal democracies”. Kauth and King (2021) defined these as a system where free elections still exist and there is no explicit violent oppression of citizens but where the regime-controlled state apparatus rejects criticism and hinders the participation of critical voices.

Earlier research on Slovenia highlighted the artificial status of the pluralist ideology (Lukšič, 2003) as well as the stronger impact of the European integration on policy as opposed to domestic politics, yet it also saw potential in the democratisation-integration interaction through the domestic cultivation of EU-policy-related cleavages (Fink-Hafner and Krašovec, 2006; Krašovec, Lajh and Kustec-Lipicer, 2007). However, the EU continued to play the role of a superior legitimiser of governments and certain

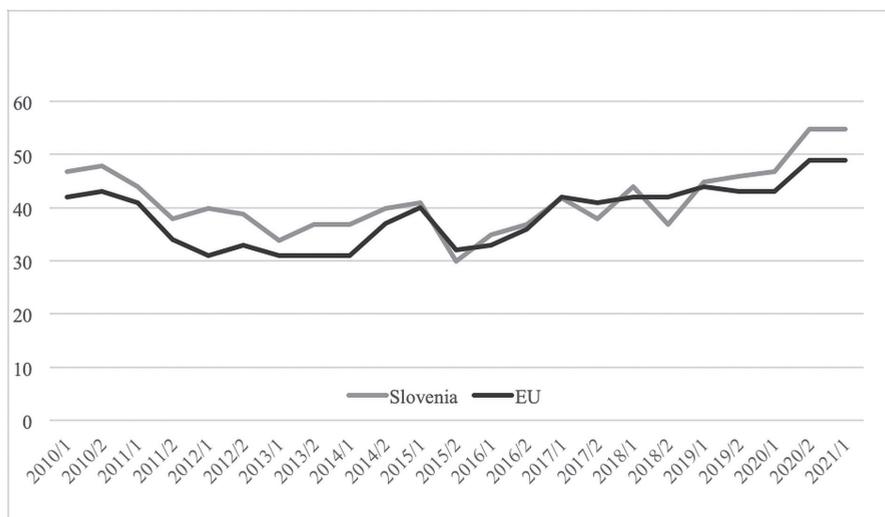
government policies (Krašovec and Lajh 2009). The “second-order” status of the European elections demonstrated the weak role of EU politics (Krašovec and Deželan, 2014). The economic crisis put corporate interest structures in Slovenia under pressure (Feldmann, 2014); it exposed the dependent financialisation pattern, which coincided with the country’s integration into the European market (Podvršič and Schmidt, 2018) and emergence of a “debt state” (Hočevar, 2021). Simultaneously, a pluri-centric, fragmented party system in the context of a proportional electoral system in Slovenia entered a negative spiral of instability, declining trust in established politics, polarisation, and de-democratisation (Fink-Hafner and Novak, 2021). This led to ideas of the faux-modern status of post-socialist societies that “merely mimicked western societies” (Fink-Hafner, 2019: 6).

Demand for and supply of Euroscepticism and populism in Slovenia in the global and EU crises context: existing studies and data

While one can find systematic public opinion surveys on attitudes to the EU in Slovenia, this is not the case for populism and liberalism, let alone liberal internationalism. Public opinion in Slovenia has been relatively pro-EU oriented (Kukovič and Haček, 2016). The global financial and economic crisis and the Eurozone crisis saw a decline in support for the EU on the economy and highlighted Slovenia’s perceived weak political voice in the EU and, with respect to the migration crisis, comparatively greater support for the national governments in the area of security (Lovec, 2019). The decline in the EU’s “output legitimacy” during the global and Eurozone crises was joined during the migrant and refugee crisis by the role of the drop in the EU’s “input legitimacy” (Lovec, 2019). This is shown by the decline in support for the EU below the EU average in the second half of 2015, followed by another two such occurrences between 2017 and 2018 (Figure 1). Towards the end of the period, the trend again reversed (Figure 1; Eurobarometer 2021b), probably in response to the increased output legitimacy of the EU and to the domestic supply-side Euroscepticism and authoritarian trends, as discussed below.

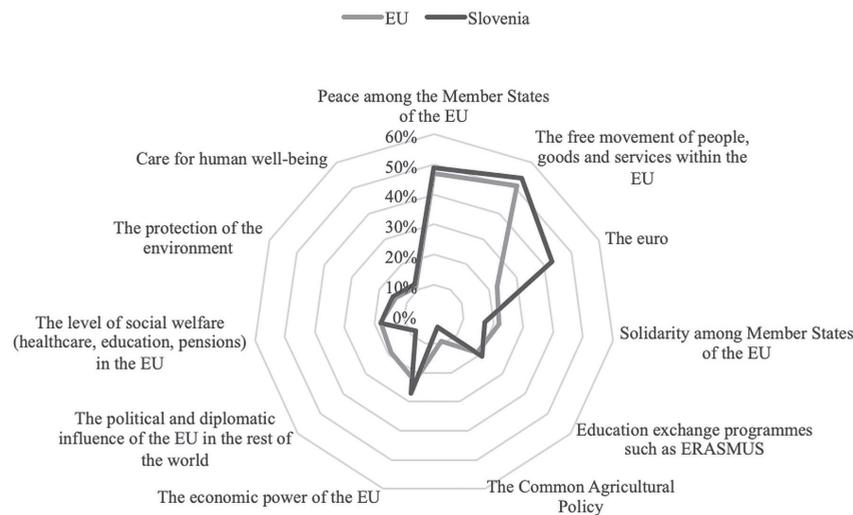
Slovenian attitudes to the EU have relied on the relatively positive view of the impact of the EU’s economic/functionalist policies where the EU competences are particularly strong, such as of the four freedoms and the euro, as opposed to the relatively more negative view of the distributive policies, solidarity, and international role of the EU (Figure 2). The economy and mobility have been comparatively important for identifying with the EU as opposed to the roles of geography, culture or shared values (Figure 3). This may be explained by the independent state’s small size, open economy, and short history.

Figure 1: TRUST IN THE EU (% TOTAL TRUST) IN SLOVENIA AND THE EU



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2021a.

Figure 2: THE MOST POSITIVE RESULT OF THE EU

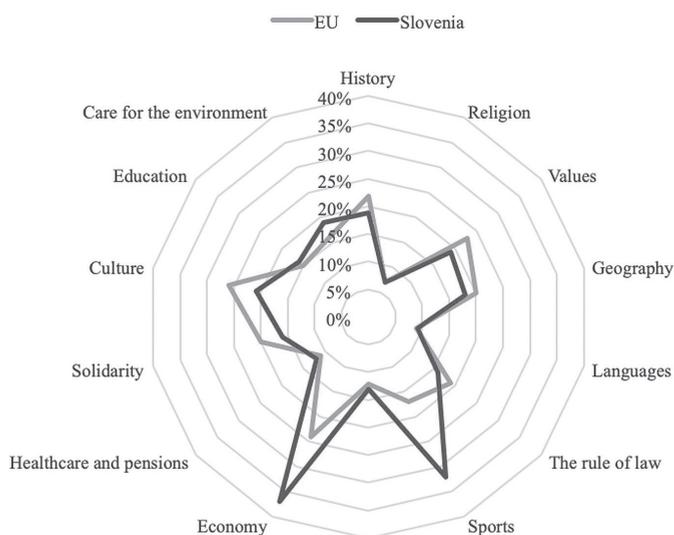


Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2021c.

Throughout most of the EU crisis period, Slovenian public opinion showed relatively high levels of distrust in the elites (Lovec, 2019: chapters 1, 4). Attitudes to the liberal internationalism and pluralist values have been more positive than in the rest of CEE, but depended on the particular type and framing (Lovec, 2019: chapter 3). Recent surveys demonstrate

levels above the EU average as concerns the role of an independent judiciary and the media (Eurobarometer 2019b; 2021e), associated with a liberal democracy, and show the government's arbitrariness as the biggest threat while attributing the EU with a positive role with the regard to these values (Eurobarometer, 2019a; 2021b; 2021d).

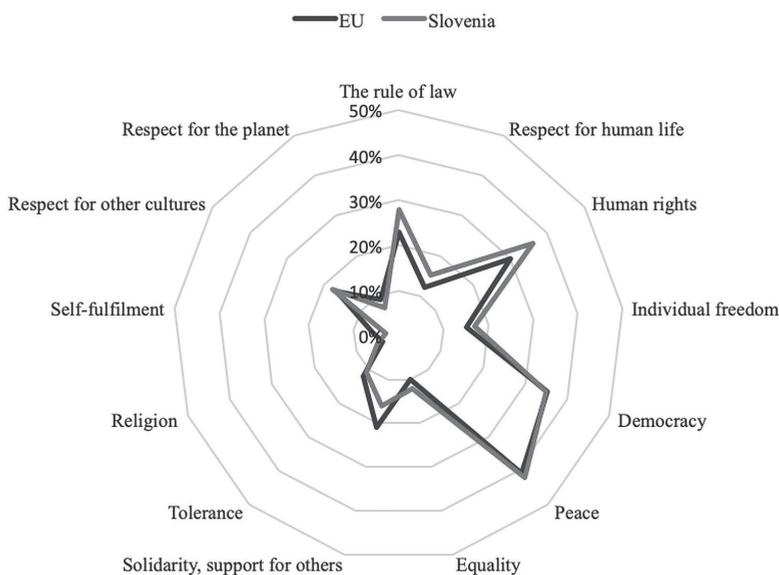
Figure 3: SUBJECTS THAT MOST CREATE A FEELING OF COMMUNITY AMONG EU CITIZENS



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2021c.

More detailed studies of demographic variables revealed that due to the high overall support the variation in attitudes to the EU and liberal values cannot be attributed to or explained by any of the main categories (Lovec, 2019: chapter 4). Support for the EU has been significantly lower (in statistical terms) among demographic groups like women, less-educated and lower-income respondents (Lovec, 2019: chapter 4; also Eurobarometer 2020), indicating the role of relatively lower benefits or exclusion. More important has been correlation with more expressed anti-elite attitudes, and with voters of the radical left and right wing, and of individual smaller centre-left parties, indicating the role of politicisation (Lovec, 2019: chapter 4). Other significant correlations included the increase of anti-elitism/populism with age, a lower education and income, impact of education on perception of the lower importance of a homogenous society and of the higher importance of an independent judiciary, and perception of the greater importance of a strong leader in rural areas and among voters of right-wing parties in Slovenia (Lovec, 2019: chapter 4).

Figure 4: VALUES THAT BEST REPRESENT THE EU



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2021c.

On the supply side, the Slovenian National Party (SNS) has been considered the most important hard Eurosceptic and nationalist populist party in Slovenia (Fink-Hafner, 2019: 63–82; Taggart and Pirro, 2021; Table 1). SNS failed to clear the parliamentary threshold at the 2011 and 2014 elections but returned to parliament in 2018, which is in line with the argument on the role of input/supply-side Euroscepticism in this period. Another party characterised as softly Eurosceptic is The Left (Levica) (Taggart and Pirro, 2021; Table 1). The United Left, later renamed The Left, entered parliament in 2014 after being established just prior in the context of the austerity measures. It shared features with Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain and was against the EU's *ordo liberalism* and interventionist/military foreign policy. Taggart and Pirro (2021, Table 1) also identify certain hard-right populist and Eurosceptic elements in Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), which after the EU crises increasingly aligned itself with the illiberal democratic regime of Victor Orban, and attempted to interfere in the judiciary, civil society and the media (Freedomhouse, 2021). Finally, Taggart and Pirro (2021, Table 1) also identify populist elements in individual newly emerging centre-left parties, specifically Marjan Šarec's List (LMS), which was established and entered parliament in 2018 and led the government between 2018 and 2020.

In the 2018–2021 period, hard Euroscepticism and populism could be seen with some non-parliamentary parties like the communist Socialist

Party of Slovenia (SPS), the anti-globalist identitarian Homeland League (Domovinska liga) (established before the 2019 European parliament elections) or the nativist United Slovenia (Zedinjena Slovenija) (Table 1).

Table 1: SLOVENIAN EUROSCEPTIC AND POPULIST PARTIES
IN THE 2018–2021 PERIOD

	Thick ideology	Populism	Euroscepticism	Liberal internationalism
SPS (non-parliamentary)	Socialism/communism	Faux-modern: Against Western capitalist elites	Hard: the EU is a fascist organisation headed by Germany	Against Western dictates, for cooperation with BRICS and RF in particular
The Left (parliamentary 2014: 6%; 2018: 9.3%)	Democratic socialism		Soft: against anti-social, pro-corporate taxation, PESCO and EU-NATO cooperation	Sovereignty over the economy and trade
LMŠ (parliamentary 2018: 12.6%)	Social-liberal	*Anti-establishment/ corruption, reformist, power to the people		
SDS (parliamentary 2014: 20%; 2018: 25%)	Conservatism, liberalism (for the free market)		*Against left-sponsored migration, multiculturalism and false solidarity	
Homeland league (non-parliamentary)	Identitarian	Modern: Against globalist elites	Soft: against multiculturalism, centralism, LGBTQ+ ideology, federalism	Against globalism
SNS (parliamentary 2018: 4%)	Nationalism, social conservatism	Modern: corrupt elites, mostly leftist ones	Hard: Sloexit due to EU's external trade competences and regulatory interference	Sovereign decisions, less trade cooperation with the USA and more with the RF
United Slovenia (non-parliamentary)	Nativism	Faux-modern: (Foreign) elites are criminals and thieves	Hard: the EU is undemocratic, perpetrates ethnic genocide against states	Against sovereignty transfer, for an alliance with non-EU European countries

Legend: *Elements of populism and Euroscepticism.

Source: own elaboration based on Taggart and Pirro (2021) for SDS, Levica, SNS and LMŠ; Fink-Hafner (2019: 63–82) for SNS; the manifestos of SNS (2018), SPS (2018), Levica (2018), Domovinska liga (2018) and Zedinjena Slovenija (2018).

None of the parties mentioned above directly argued against liberal-pluralist elements such as checks and balances, political competition and basic rights. Still, the SDS-led government, supported by SNS, was accused of making such attempts. Several other parties were opposed to the transfer of sovereignty to international institutions (e.g. on trade and security) and proposed greater cooperation with non-Western countries, particularly the Russian Federation (RF), which is considered a model of “authoritarian democracy” (Table 1).

To summarise, positive attitudes to the EU in Slovenia have been based on the view of a modern liberal internationalist state. The EU crises have led to a crisis in the legitimacy of the pro-EU elites and to an increase in input and supply-side Euroscepticism, which has been interrelated with and mutually reinforced by populism and illiberalism (Lovec, 2019). On the political left, these crises have made neoliberalism more vocal and shifted anti-globalism and identity politics to the political right (Adam, 2017). Certain faux-modern elements such as social conservatism and illiberalism have been co-opted by mainstream politics, like elsewhere in CEE (Cabada, 2021).

Research into popular discontent with the EU from below

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This part of the article draws on data collected within the EU-funded project “Tackling Eurosceptic and illiberal narratives from below” in mid 2021. We conducted FGs with supporters of populist and Eurosceptic parties and interviews with public opinion experts, journalists and opinion-makers who mediate between elite and popular views. The design of the FGs and interviews was the same for all country case studies, albeit their number differed depending on the size and variety within each country. In Slovenia, in line with the results of the desk research presented above, two FGs were held, one with supporters of The Left in Ljubljana and one with supporters of SNS and Domovinska liga in the Ptuj area (Appendix 1) while five people were interviewed (a public opinion expert, three NGO, civil society, and advocacy experts, and a senior journalist) (Appendix 2). The FG participants and interviewees were asked four groups of questions, each targeting one of the variables (in brackets): on general understanding of the EU/Europe in Slovenia (EU attitudes and identification), impacts of the EU (contested polity and policies), competing political visions and actors (politics - thick ideologies) and views on the liberal democracy (populism, illiberalism). To assess the data, we conducted content analysis aiming to analyse the relationships between concepts or terms within or between texts (transcripts). We assessed those by taking our conceptual understanding and previous desk research into consideration.

Focus groups: disappointment with the EU as a liberal project on the right, outright criticism of it on the left

Supporters of right-wing populist and Eurosceptic parties shared disappointment with the country's EU membership. According to A1, an older participant, "We expected more. There are no jobs and those that exist are poorly paid". A2, a middle-aged private entrepreneur noted: "In the beginning, it seemed that we would be more independent /.../ now everything is dictated from Brussels /.../ there is too much bureaucracy". The respondents did not see any essential contradiction between their national and EU identity: "if it was what they promised, the two can go along" (A1). The younger participants (A3 and A4) highlighted the lack of (positive) information and direction as well as of a sense of belonging and social fabric.

The participants were specifically critical of the EU's undemocratic polity, specifically the European Commission as a supranational technocratic body. According to A1, "A bunch of bureaucrats dictates what we should eat and drink. We should put our foot down and be more independent instead of obeying every dictate". Meanwhile, A4 stated, "/the EU/ is mostly about well paid jobs in Commission /.../ not accountable to anyone /.../. The European parliament has no powers to initiate legislation, only the Commission can". Participants argued that "powers should be brought back" (A3) and should be "in line with the Slovenian Constitution" (A2).

In terms of underlying ideologies, according to A1, "it is positive that we got rid of Yugoslavia, but we did not get rid of socialism /.../ the left cannot do the sort of things they did in Yugoslavia yet socialism is still there". The hypocrisy of the left was pointed out, such as on migration, which proved to be a sensitive policy area: "I am not a nationalist, but we cannot take them all. Consider the social costs. We should stop them at the source. Leftists, they used to shoot economic emigrants on the border!" (A1). A2 highlighted the constraints on business due to the migration-related internal border restrictions. According to A3, in the EU "only collective problems should be dealt with jointly", "based on subsidiarity", "in line with the original idea of lower trade barriers, cooperation on the economy and security", as opposed to the "ideas of multiculti globalists on abandoning national democracies and state. It could be a federation but based on sovereign states and not a classical one of untied states of Europe a la Weber and Macron".

Asked about the liberal democracy, an older participant (A1) expressed anti-pluralist views: "All parties are the same. Communists in disguise, changing their clothes. It is part of a multiparty system". Most participants viewed the role of the media and experts to be instrumental. According to A3, "their (elite) ideas are different to ours".

Unlike the FG A participants, the supporters of The Left – mostly younger, female, better-educated and urban – were from the onset critical of the European integration, which they understood as a “liberal economic project” (B1) that “does not care about the social dimension” (B2) and even an “ideological tool” “to subjugate non-Western areas” (B1). In their view, the EU is “unambitious” (B1), “is not headed in any direction” (B3) and, if it is, “it is definitely pursuing the interests of capital, not the people” (B1). According to B4, “Brussels is becoming an institution where we only apply for the co-financing of projects”. Identification with the EU was impacted by their sense of detachment. B3 noted that “while she has both labels in her passport, she cannot imagine what Slovenian and European mean”. B1 felt “more Slovenian than European” because he was “never on an Erasmus programme and pays taxes in Slovenia”. B2 argued that she is “neither Slovenian nor European, but a citizen of the world”.

The FG B participants in principle saw more positive than negative effects of the integration, yet also noted contradictions with the underlying neoliberalism. For example, B2 argued that “education and training”, fields where she had personally experienced a strong impact of the EU (referring to the Bologna reform of higher education), is also where “the effect of the EU was the most negative”. B3 added, “the horrible reform was oriented towards competences, meaning that it treats people as human resources”. Similarly, B1 argued that “on an individual level, it is very stimulating for a Bulgarian citizen to study and work in Belgium, but it is a disaster for the Bulgarian socio-economic environment”.

FG B commonly blamed liberal political elites, “the Western bourgeoisie and their local assistants” (B1), arguing it would be “unthinkable that Slovenia would produce politicians such as Guy Verhofstadt” (B2). “Western liberals” were also blamed for the pervasive global problems such as the lack of social cohesion (B2; B3), inactivity in dealing with the climate crisis (B4) and the erosion of human rights in (B1). In contrast to FG A, the FG B participants (B1, B3) expressed confidence in public and international news outlets.

In a comparative perspective, the FG A participants (supporters of populist Eurosceptic right-wing parties) were critical of the EU for its perceived failure to deliver on the economy and political independence, while the FG B participants (left-wing party supporters) saw those failures enshrined in the integration from the start. From a thick ideology perspective, the FG A participants associated the failure to deliver with the centralist-bureaucratic tendencies, which they described as socialist, while for the FG B participants it was part of the neoliberal ideology promoted by Western actors. In the first group, populism was expressed in a reactionary nationalist form, with certain faux-modern elements present such as distrust in pluralist

institutions, while in the second group, post-modern elements like global citizenship and cosmopolitanism were present but also detached from the EU's actual polity or policies.

Interviews: the shallow integration of Slovenian and EU politics

The interviewees described the relationship between Slovenian and European identity as a positive and non-conflicting one, but also noted the view that, as expressed by Interviewee 1, “European identity was never well-articulated or attractive to any group nor a source of any particular cleavages”. Some stated that European values are “underpinning the Slovenian identity” (Interview 2) and were complementary (Interview 4), especially in the instance of “lifting /the Slovenian identity/ to a higher level” (Interview 4) such as, for example by, historically supporting the resistance to totalitarianism, e.g. the Italian fascism and German Nazism (Interview 4). While in the 1990s in the context of independence national identity prevailed, the issue of ‘Europeanness’ came more to the surface during the EU accession period (Interview 1). “By 2020, belonging to Europe had increased; yet only 10% of respondents placed being European first (up from 1% in 1991). On the other hand, national identity was placed first at only 37%, quite low compared to the other countries, followed by region (19%), town (25%) and the world (8%)” (Interview 1). More recently, the perception of European identity was explained as depending more on the position of each individual (Interview 5). Still, “as opposed to the rest of the region, Slovenia does not have a great historical narrative, nationalism has in most part not been toxic or exclusivist, with references to Karantanija or the political programme of SNS in this regard seen as grotesque” (Interview 1). The high support for the EU – largely associated with Europe – by as much as 75% of the population in the 1990s, “was influenced by euphoria” and in recent years has stabilised at around 45% (Interview 1). “Support for the European integration has on a scale of 1-10 been around 6, with a possible positive upwards variation in instances of specifically framed questions (Interview 1). On average, “cleavages such as young-old, urban-rural and similar exist, but cannot as such explain views on the EU/Europe since positive views are prevalent in all categories” (Interview 1). Some variation in public opinion can be explained by party support and, to a certain extent, by religion (Interview 1). Importantly, the EU has also been an ‘empty signifier’. According to Interviewee 3, “people had a much clearer picture of what European identity means before the accession”. The EU has since not been an important topic in Slovenia (Interviewees 2, 3). This has allowed topics like migration and the pandemic to trigger strong feelings among the affected groups (Interview 1). Interviewee 5 stated, “Slovenians are pro-European until

it comes to contested issues such as the migrant crisis and the pandemic, when they react according to how threatening they perceive this to be to them". Weak awareness creates space for the strong domestic framing of the debates: "The general public does not know the 'weight' held by particular political groups, EU institutions, and the role of Slovenian actors within them" (Interview 5) and "narratives such as on globalism vs sovereignty are, like the EU itself, too sophisticated for ordinary people" (Interview 1). "Concrete issues such as migration or LGBTQ+ can /be used to/ sow division" (Interview 4). An example was mentioned of the actions of one party that create the impression we have a bigger voice than we do and fuels all sorts of Euroscepticism (Interviewees 3, 4). Politicisation of the EU has been heavily affected by changes in the political class. According to Interviewee 1:

The fall of the Iron Curtain was perceived as the beginning of normality the West was a synonym of. For the right-wing party Christian Democracy (Kohl and similar), this was seen as the gold standard. Left-wing parties were more articulated and critical (e.g. of neoliberalism in the 1990s), but felt it would not pay to go against it. Today, certain values that are universal and not exclusively related with Europe but strongest here are contested. It is part of a broader global change. The EU is regrouping, but is often pragmatic and not doing enough for their defence. Slovenia was self-isolated by the current elites. Centre-left parties for tactical reasons are now defending these values but face difficulties because in the economic area they generate injustice, neoliberalism still being present. They and The Greens are currently exploring new paradigms. The right wing is upset because of the interference with identity. They reuse age-old cleavages such as on Islam, being upset for the fact that a Europe represented by the likes of Kohl and Mitterrand no longer exists.

In summary, the interviewees pointed to the supportive and non-conflicting attitudes to the EU in Slovenia, but also to the quite shallow foundations of Slovenian EU attitudes, making the country vulnerable to various crises and the particular domestication of debates. They argued that the broader crisis of liberal-conservative politics has given rise to reactionary nationalism while from the start centre-left politics was trapped between criticism of neoliberalism and support for progressive internationalism. The interviewees saw the weak European integration as the source of the mainstreaming of the faux-modern elements.

Conclusion

This article has explored the link between rise of Euroscepticism and populism in the Slovenian post-global and EU crises context. It considered the argument that the permissive consensus and shallow interaction between domestic and EU politics makes Slovenia vulnerable to the backlash against the pro-EU/liberal permissive elites. It examined different types of populism – modern nationalist, postmodern cosmopolitan and faux-modern-partly modernised.

The desk research concerning the demand- and supply-side dynamics demonstrated that the EU crises initially led to a decline in support for the EU, based on the drop in the EU's output legitimacy and that this later triggered input-side Euroscepticism, mutually reinforced by populism and illiberalism. While on the left anti-neoliberalism became more vocal, on the right, a reactionary-nationalist type of populism emerged with some faux-modern elements also being mainstreamed. The FGs revealed other differences between the supporters of right- and left-wing Eurosceptic and populist parties. The former expressed disappointment with the EU's impact on the economic welfare and political independence of Slovenia and revealed reactionary-nationalist populism with some faux-modern elements. The latter have from the outset been critical of the neoliberal ideology driving the integration project. They demonstrated elements of post-modern populism that are detached from the EU's polity or policy. Finally, the interviewees confirmed views of the mostly positive EU attitudes in Slovenia but also of the weak integration of Slovenian-EU politics. In their view, the crisis of liberal conservatism has resulted in reactionary nationalism, while the centre-left is trapped between criticism of neoliberalism and tactical co-optation with the political liberalism.

As a small country and an open economy, Slovenia is especially dependent on the EU's 'internationalist state' model. The findings indicate the need for Slovenian political actors to better cultivate different visions of the European integration and (liberal) internationalism to prevent a destructive and polarising vertical cleavage from occurring between vulgar liberalism (neoliberalism) on one hand and pure vulgarism (pre-modern ideologies) on the other. The ideas of a differentiated integration (on the centre-right) and of progressive internationalist/cosmopolitan transformative green growth (on the centre-left) seem particularly relevant, as does a discussion of the alternatives (and threats) to the 'Western' liberal internationalism, increasingly embodied by Russia and China.

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Appendix 1: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

FG A (May 2021):

- (1) 62-year-old, male, Ptuj area, vocational education, toolmaker, SNS-voter
- (2) 47-year-old, male, Ptuj area, vocational education, locksmith, SNS-voter
- (3) 33-year-old, female, Ptuj area, vocational education, employed in services, Homeland League-voter
- (4) 27-year-old, male, Ptuj area, secondary education, student, no expressed party preferences

FG B (June 2021):

- (1) 31-year-old, male, Ljubljana area, BA degree, project manager, Levica-voter
- (2) 36-year-old, female, Ljubljana area, MA degree, high-school teacher, no expressed party preferences
- (3) 22-year-old, female, Ljubljana area, secondary education, student, Levica-voter
- (4) 28-year-old, female, Ljubljana area, PhD candidate, junior researcher, no expressed party preferences

Appendix 2: Interviews

- (1) Samo Uhan, Head of the Centre of Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, 24. 6. 2021.
- (2) Adriana Aralica, Project Coordinator, Platform of non-governmental organisations for development, global education and humanitarian aid, 9. 7. 2021.
- (3) Ana Pavlič, Programme Director, Institute for Gender Equality, 9. 7. 2021.
- (4) David Ažnoh, Vice-President, Confederation of Slovenian trade unions, 12. 7. 2021.
- (5) Marjan Vešligaj, journalist, Radio-Television Slovenia, 15. 7. 2021.