





ANALYSIS

Political Alienation in the Labour Market: The Future of Populism in Europe

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1. Introduction

For the past few years, the European Union has witnessed a vast increase in support towards populist movements. Although this phenomenon has been classified as a severe concern by the conventional political scene and a threat to democracy, the tendency has not slowed down and the situation continues to aggravate.

Migration and the refugee crisis have undoubtedly been key points of the debate. The economic part, while relevant, has nearly faded into smoke with the end of the Euro crisis and the return to a generally successful improvement of macroeconomic indicators across the European Union countries. However, it is necessary to pay extra attention to the economy's structure and its political implications.

The purpose of this analysis is to emphasize the role of political alienation, appearing through economic inequality and, more precisely, as a consequence of the situation of the labour market, in the rise of populism. Furthermore, it attempts to stress the urgency of preparing for imminent changes in the labour market as a strategy for containing the spread of those populist movements, which are threatening the European upholding ideologies.

This research discusses how economic divergence between groups of society is a key factor in the rise of European populism, independently of how sound a country's macroeconomic indicators are. For that, focus will be given to a country's labour market and how preventing further divergences due to technological innovation and, more precisely, automation, is indispensable for the maintenance of our democratic system and ensuring a dignified life for all groups of society.

Automation, the process of fully or partially replacing humans with machines in the execution of a task, has been on the process of becoming a reality and is expected to be implemented in the near future. This will create a turmoil in the labour market, with numerous individuals being left without occupation and, possibly, being unable to find a new one. Furthermore, if they find a precarious new one, complications will still arise.

Smart and fair preventive measures must be widely implemented in order to avoid further inequality and underrepresentation of certain factions of society. Otherwise, the European Union will face serious ordeals, which may result in unpredictable consequences for its political environment through a mass-, and additional enlargement of the support base of populist movements.

In this paper, the focus is put on Germany. The German case is a very interesting one to observe, as the country not only is the strongest economy in Europe but is also suffering some of the most severe waves of populism. Not only that, but its particular structure allows for an analysis of the effects of economic welfare on the population's tendency towards far-right populist movements. Another point facilitating the analysis of the German case is the existence of important and detailed documentation regarding its early 2000s labour reforms and the economic and social impacts they had.

After making an analysis regarding the correlation between economic welfare and underrepresentation and the enhancement of the populist trend in Germany, the discussion will be two-fold. First, an analysis of how labour market reforms played a role in the rise of populism in the country will be presented. Following that, the urgency for the European Union to prepare for future changes regarding the automation of activities and the major implications that it could have for the future of democracy in Europe are stressed.

2. The Rise of Populism in the European Union

Populism has been widely regarded as one of the most urgent issues threatening the current legal and political shape of the European Union. Over the last decade, the rise of extreme right- and left-wing parties has been shaking the foundations of democracy in Europe at a scale that the vast majority thought of as part of a distant, more separatist past.

Economic problems and migration issues have been chronicled as the catalysts of this extreme nationalist feeling. However, following the recovery from the Eurozone crisis, Europe's most robust economies saw their populist movements getting increased momentum, which coincided with the refugee crisis.

An aggravation of violent conflict in the Middle East and Africa resulted in millions of individuals trying to flee to Europe, in search of a safer and more prosperous reality¹. This was, undoubtedly, a key aspect of the populist political strategy. Blaming immigrants and refugees for the wave of terrorist attacks, unemployment and general economic distress became a triggering recipe to the diffusion of far-right ideologies. But how clear is the impact of migrants and associated racist and xenophobic tendencies in the rise of populism?

3. Elitism and Political Alienation

In the contemporary global democratic system, states have usually been ruled by entitled worthy individuals mainly selected by ruling political parties. These groups, apparently distinguished people coming from top universities with a broad and cosmopolitan education, have been described as the ablest and the ones with the greatest amount of knowledge to run a country.

In fact, elitism defends the idea that there is a small group of elites with a better capacity of defending the interests of the masses than the masses themselves². However, elitist theory does not state this in a condescending way. It simply aligns with the fact that when we need brain surgery, we want an elite surgeon and not a random person. If we are arrested, we surely will want to be defended by someone with exquisite knowledge of the law.

The existence of an elite does not necessarily imply that a person's essence is at a higher level of hierarchy, but rather that an individual went through a more precise educational process regarding one or more topics. Undoubtedly, that is ideal for a society, but only when an elite acts according to the public interest and is not biased towards a part of the population.

¹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/refugee-crisis-in-europe/>

² http://paperroom.ipso.org/papers/paper_11235.pdf

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For a long time, underrepresented individuals in the EU did not have enough strength to cause noteworthy commotion. Nonetheless, as we are able to observe by the fragile state of European democracy, that is not the case anymore. The increased support for populist movements translates the discontentment of these underrepresented groups towards the elites.

However, even though part of the individuals supporting far-right movements can be looked at as extremists and are associated with dangerous authoritarian and anti-rights ideologies, some of its participants are simply underrepresented individuals from an economic perspective. Technological evolution, structural reforms and globalization have not affected everyone in the same way, being rather prejudicial to some members of society.

Instead of acknowledging these people's concerns, decision-makers have mostly ignored these groups due to their negligent weight in the electoral process and the improvement of the economy's macroeconomics indicators (which far too often serves as a synonym of political success).

While that worked for some time, parties using populist strategies, such as National Front in France and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, were able to entice underrepresented workers to intrinsically harmful and anti-democratic groups, creating an agglomerate of followers large enough to shake countries' political scene³. These populist movements of nationalist nature have become a threat to the global environment of international cooperation achieved in the decades following the Second World War.

With that being said, policy-makers need to take the preoccupations of these groups into consideration. Economic inequality and partially disadvantageous policies, combined with political alienation, have created a sizeable divide and set on motion harmful events for the desired state of peace in Europe.

Labour conditions are, without a doubt, one of the main dictators of the economic and social welfare in a country. Therefore, unevenly balanced reforms of the labour market should have significant consequences for a country's political environment and voting pattern.

For that reason, studying its impact on the rise of populism and understanding how further adjustments on the labour market, particularly due to consequences of technological innovation, will affect society is of the uttermost importance.

4. Economic Welfare and Populism in Germany

Before starting to analyse the important impact of the labour market in the populist trend, it is necessary to understand how the divergence in the economic welfare between certain segments of the population may contribute for populist support.

Both pro-populist and anti-populist groups have put migration on the centre of the undergoing political debate. Populist leaders have been using it as a propaganda instrument, blaming the loss of welfare some citizens faced on immigrants and refugees. On the other hand, defenders of immigration

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/how-populism-emerged-as-electoral-force-in-europe>

refer to it as both a moral responsibility and a pivotal economic advantage due to the demographic problems in Europe.

While some far-right populist parties are indeed related to racist, anti-minorities and xenophobic entities, it would be naive to assume this as a relevant component of all supporters. Part of those individuals are simply unsatisfied with mainstream political parties and are longing for a favourable change. Others, while widely disagreeing with these populist parties, vote for them as an act of political protest. With that being the case, how impactful is economic welfare on tendencies towards populist movements?

In Germany, there is a clear social and economic difference between West and East Germany. After the country's separation in 1945, the two parts were subject to very dissimilar growth paths. While the West part fully recovered due to the Marshall plan and turned into one of the most developed and successful economies in the world, the reality for East Germany, due to its *authoritarian communist regime*, was completely opposite. Nearly three decades after the reunification of the country, convergence was not reached⁴. In 2014, wages in the East were about two-third of the ones in the West. Not only that, East Germans were 25% more likely to cross the poverty line than their West counterparts⁵.

AfD, Germany's far-right populist party, was created in 2013. When observing a map with the percentage of the party's voters in each county, during the second round of the 2017 federal elections, we are able to see a clear pattern towards the East⁶. In numerous counties, the party even managed to be the most voted political party. While the rest of the country showed some support for AfD as well, the trend is transparent. Furthermore, it is also possible to observe that most of the areas giving AfD a higher percentage of the votes have a very small percentage of foreign-born individuals.

Therefore, although there is an anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, it could be dangerous to neglect how the importance of economic distress. While it is hard to accurately create patterns and explain the rise of the far right in Germany, a further look should be given to the economic welfare of the citizens. Even though that is apparently clear, a constructive discussion of the matter is rather forgotten in the political debate in favour of a discussion on migration and other elements.

5. Germany's Labour Reforms and the Rise of the Far Right

With the fast and unpredictable technological evolution happening in the last decades and the constantly increasing number of individuals with tertiary education, the changes in European labour market are undeniable⁷. It ceased to be possible for governments to conduct labour-related policy-making as if there was a homogeneous working class.

Furthermore, labour reforms regarding the level of protection of different sectors' employees and the welfare system are frequently divisive, as usually there are individuals who benefit from it and others who do not. Therefore, governments generally try to implement measures that benefit the core part of its electoral public.

⁴ <http://fortune.com/2014/11/09/germany-east-west-economy/>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/02/german-reunification-25-years-on-how-different-are-east-and-west-really>

⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-germany-post-election-analysis/>

⁷ <http://www.strediskovzdelavacipolitiky.info/download/Access%20to%20a%20Degree%20in%20Europe%202013.pdf>

As important as scrutinizing the unemployment levels is, it still represents an incomplete method of measuring the economic well-being of the population. Therefore, a more thorough study of the country's labour market is necessary.

In 2002, Germany's growth rate was lower than its EU counterparts and the unemployment rate was above 10%. Additionally, its welfare system was regarded as exorbitantly generous⁸. In order to improve the performance of the German economy, a set of reforms were applied to its labour market. These, known as the Hartz reforms, resulted in a cut of unemployment benefits for long-term unemployed and a loss of security for short-term unemployed in the risk of continuing without a work⁹. On top of that, penalties were established for individuals who refused job offers considered reasonable.

Measures that flex the labour market tend to improve the efficiency of the economy. That was the case in Germany, as the country went back to enjoying economic prosperity¹⁰, with a boost in growth, a large reduction of the unemployment level and the improvement of its labour market mobility.

However, there are also negative consequences from labour reforms, as part of the labour supply is marginalized. The ones hurt might stop regarding the typical political parties as the way to achieve economic equality and their representation.

In fact, a study shows that labour market dualization actively contributes to political alienation and encourages populist movements¹¹. Observing the German case, the author was able to link the German Hartz reforms to the rising support for extreme right-wing populist movements in the country.

In the same paper, we can see that while the reforms improved labour-cost competitiveness for Germany and achieved its goal of decreasing the unemployment levels, translating into an improvement of the country's macro-economic indicators, it resulted in a welfare loss for a part of its population and created a noticeable rift between protected and unprotected workers. As the legislation protecting temporary workers was loosened, there was a consequent negative wage adjustment for them.

The discontentment of the marginalized with the economic reality of a country may create incentives to shift to populist parties. The creation of AfD, a far-right populist party, in 2013, endowed German workers who had been underrepresented with an attractive premise promising to provide them with a voice and resolve their concerns. Although the economic policies defended by the party¹², such as further deregulation in the labour-market, would negatively affect them, it still represented an opportunity for them to be heard.

⁸ <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/hartz-reform/>

⁹ <https://voxeu.org/article/german-labour-reforms-unpopular-success>

¹⁰ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/european-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/LEQSPaper132.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/european-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/LEQSPaper132.pdf>

¹² https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf

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As a matter of fact, almost 20% of AfD supporters in 2016 had household income equal or inferior to 1250 Euros. Furthermore, in the same year, it was possible to observe great levels of support from blue collar workers towards the party¹³.

The considerable number of immigrants in Germany has been used as a propaganda instrument by populist movements. However, it is necessary to understand some supporters may be acting out of concern for employment and economic welfare and not inherent racism or xenophobia.

Alienation in the labour market and consequential divergence in public interest can then pose a problem for mainstream political parties, as conducted policy-making may benefit one group but not the other. That provides populist parties with an opening to obtain the support of the marginalized by blaming the economic distress on cultural factors, allowing them to obtain considerable political weight.

It is often forgotten in public discourse that macroeconomic indicators are not sufficient to evaluate the wellbeing of the population. Leaders need to start paying attention the long-term consequences of their actions, not only for its citizens but for the existing democratic institutions.

For current policy-makers, an extensive part of the discussion should focus on automation and the future of the labour market. While the topic has been greatly discussed, with the near mass disappearance of certain job positions and the creation of new ones being a well-known fact. However, what will be the implications for our democratic system? Will we be able to prevent this imminent shock from enhancing the momentum of populist movements in the EU?

6. Automation: A Threat to Democracy in Europe

The future of automation in society is widely discussed. Philosophers, politicians and economists continuously debate on how our reality is going to shift dramatically due to this phenomenon. While the automation of activities can improve an economy's productivity and achieve better results, current lines of work will inevitably be replaced by new ones that better fit the new layout.

This will not be the first time in history technological innovation causes major alterations in the structure of the labour force. In the twentieth century, there was a mass automation of the agricultural sector, which only did not result in massive long-run unemployment since new job positions were created¹⁴. However, that smoothness is far from being a safe prediction for the near future.

Half of activities performed by the world's workforce could be automated by adapting current technologies¹⁵. These mostly include activities of predictable nature which show patterns, like data collection and parts assembling. In fact, more than 20% of current activities in Europe could be displaced by automation until 2030¹⁶, which represents a large part of the labour force. Taking into consideration what was previously said, this will create sizeable difficulties for policy-makers.

¹³ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40856-018-0028-7>

¹⁴ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/digital-disruption/harnessing-automation-for-a-future-that-works>

¹⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/digital-disruption/harnessing-automation-for-a-future-that-works>

¹⁶ <https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Future%20of%20Organizations/What%20the%20future%20of%20work%20will%20mean%20for%20jobs%20skills%20and%20wages/MGI-Jobs-Lost-Jobs-Gained-Report-December-6-2017.ashx>

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It is true that numerous job positions are expected to be created in the close future. Rising income and consumption, aging populations (and thus a boom of the healthcare system) and technological development itself are expected to contribute to a larger demand for workers¹⁷. Nevertheless, that does not mean the workers in transition of occupations possess the skills needed for the new positions.

Millions of European citizens could be left without an occupation. Unless they are able to find a new one which allows them to have dignity and security, there will be major consequences for the European political system due to its impact on economic welfare.

Individuals with lower qualifications and weak proficiency in problem-solving matters are much more likely to be badly affected by technological change, facing a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion¹⁸. Ironically, that is the group less prone to participate in training programs. In fact, access to learning opportunities remains vastly unequal when comparing different socioeconomic groups.

There is a great deficiency in policies towards the upskilling of the labour force¹⁹. Those who are already employed are left at risk of skill obsolescence, while long-term unemployed people, who have the greatest need for training, are the hardest to reach.

Although an estimated 70 million Europeans struggle with basic reading and writing and using digital tools, the European Social Fund investment on education and training, from 2024 to 2030, is only expected to reach 8 million individuals²⁰. Furthermore, it is necessary to evaluate its efficiency. While that is an optimistic start, it still neglects the other 62 million individuals.

There are important programs preparing individuals for the realities of the labour market, funded by EU institutions, such as the Youth Guarantee²¹. This commitment, for example, which targets young people under the age of 25, aims to provide them with satisfactory employment opportunities.

While, as we have seen, policy-makers have initiated some preventive measures, mainly regarding the education process of younger generations, not enough is being done. Without a full effort from governments and firms alike, the problems in the labour market could set in motion a series of events with disastrous consequences for our democratic systems.

Furthermore, it is necessary to increase the efforts to prepare older generations who are still part of the workforce as well. Their political impact should not be ignored and an attitude of waiting for time to pass until new generations replace them is naive and further turns these individuals into objects of disdain.

Considering the significant relation between the labour market and the rise of populism, not only concerning unemployment but also other welfare aspects, the changes society will endure due to continuous technological innovation are urgent. A rise in political instability will, undoubtedly, create

¹⁷<https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Future%20of%20Organizations/What%20the%20future%20of%20work%20will%20mean%20for%20jobs%20skills%20and%20wages/MGI-Jobs-Lost-Jobs-Gained-Report-December-6-2017.ashx>

¹⁸ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001

¹⁹ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001

²⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224>

²¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079>

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turmoil in society. Historically, technological innovation has been a driver of economic inequality, as the relative wage of high skilled workers compared to low skilled ones' increases²².

Labour market flexibility has been a focus point for policy-makers, as the needed skills for businesses are always changing. However, simply relying on the efficiency of the market does not solve the problem on the long-run and keeps neglecting the human side of an economy. Keeping a society healthy and functioning well should not be only a matter of improving macroeconomic indicators.

Germany is quoted as a success case, with its economy having become more robust due to its deregulation of the labour market. However, doing that without preventive measures is a catalyst for populism movements.

It is wrong to solely focus on automation's impact on the labour force from an industry's perspective, trying to guarantee future efficiency, and forget about what it means for individuals. Financing the preparation of current workers instead of only preparing the next generations not only shows that we care about their needs but also gives them a sense of purpose and contribution towards society.

Positions that will endure the test of time will demand skills regarding communication, teamwork and emotional intelligence. Therefore, opportunities must be provided for individuals to develop them.

Due to the importance of the labour market in setting political trends, it is necessary to prepare a sound strategy in order to maintain (and improve) the structure of democracy in Europe. More emphasis on the retraining of workers and a better redistribution of income will be fundamental for a good course of action.

If that is not the case, concern over the instability of their job positions and the rise in economic inequality due to technological innovation will continue to make people feel like they are not an important part of the discussion.

Automation is not an instantaneous process. The pace of technological evolution, the cost of implementing the technologies, public regulation and competition with labour costs all influence the process. Although it will happen in a rather short-run, there is still space to mitigate its socioeconomic consequences for all society groups. These problems must be dealt with in the present, otherwise a crisis will occur in the near future.

7. Recommendations for the Future

Macroeconomic Indicators Do Not Always Represent Welfare

European policy-makers need to stop acting as if economic growth is the ultimate answer for all social problems and measuring the welfare of citizens. Aspects such as economic inequality and labour precariousness are a reality and impact Europe's social atmosphere.

²²<https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Future%20of%20Organizations/What%20the%20future%20of%20work%20will%20mean%20for%20jobs%20skills%20and%20wages/MGI-Jobs-Lost-Jobs-Gained-Report-December-6-2017.ashx>

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Economic supremacy is important for the future of the EU as a global power. However, sometimes there is a trade-off between growth and the welfare of society and that should be more integrated in the public debate instead of being disregarded. Policies only benefiting some groups and in favour of unequal growth need to be thought of thoroughly due to its social consequences.

Political Alienation Is Dangerous, Unethical and Should Not Be an Option

Leaders are supposed to represent all citizens. It is true that policies often need to be divisive and will not receive support from everyone, as different individuals have different economic and social circumstances. Nonetheless, negative consequences should not be ignored.

There is indeed an anti-rights sentiment in the rise of the far-right and it is pivotal that EU leaders acknowledge and condemn that in order to avoid its normalization in the European society. However, that should not be their only focus. Not only it is immoral to do so, but it has also proven itself to be dangerous.

Components that give impetus to the populist phenomenon, such as lack of economic welfare and opportunities and precariousness, need to be properly dealt with. The European elite needs to stop alienating part of the population and start to address the concerns of all citizens instead of playing strategic political games.

Preventive Measures for Future Shocks in the Labour Market Are Pivotal

Automation will create new obstacles in the process of obtaining a peaceful and prosperous democratic system due its consequences for the labour market. If no preventive measures are taken, mass precariousness may result in catastrophic events and a major increase in support for populist parties.

Training in digital tools and more dynamic skills is necessary in order to avoid a skills-mismatching situation. While some attempts have been done, further efforts are crucial to ensure individuals are provided with opportunities to achieve dignified and rewarding work positions.

The impact some transformations of the labour market have in contributing to populist trends should not be underestimated. The urgency this represents needs to be more extensively addressed by policy-makers.

8. Conclusion

Political alienation and underrepresentation have been going on for too long. It clearly is creating problems for the goals of an ideal democratic system and universal rights for individuals. Hostile movements are acquiring momentum by exploring this alienation problem and attracting followers tired of being ignored or dismissed. The European Union has failed to address this issue in an effective way and that must change.

A separation is needed when observing the supporters of populist parties. While it is undeniable that there are dangerous anti-democratic forces in the game, it is also true that political alienation of lower socioeconomic classes has influenced this outcome and will play a crucial role in the future.

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Safeguarding labour conditions is pivotal in the fight against populist movements. European policy-makers need to step up and ensure a smooth transition period for the workforce. It is necessary to cease ignoring and marginalising factions of society in order to ensure greater economic growth.

A solution needs to be found, one that not only preserves democracy as we know it but also safeguards all citizens' needs. For that, a healthy, transparent and somewhat relatable elite is needed. An elite that can put an end to populist movements endangering the freedoms and rights that past generations fought, and we are fighting to achieve.

Marginalization in the labour market has caused damages across European nations. Technological innovation and the obsolescence of professions will generate even bigger problems. Problems that, due to its expected magnitude, can only be solved by strong, smart and socially inclusive preventive measures.

The European political and economic elite, responsible for ensuring the best interests of the population, needs to stop ignoring its past mistakes and start preparing for the future. Nonetheless, ensuring a dignified future for everyone should result not only from fear of losing our democratic system but also from a deep moral reflection.

It is the duty of policy-makers to oblige to its citizens' needs. For the preservation of our democratic values and the containment of menacing populism movements, politics and economics need to start giving more emphasis to inclusiveness and stop underrepresenting its own.

The rise of populism Europe is facing represents, in part, a symptom of what is wrong with our political environment. However, it can turn into an opportunity to learn from errors and ensure a more inclusive and consolidated democratic system.

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