

# Populism and its impact on young people

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## Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of European politics, populism has been identified as a formidable challenge to the core values that underpin the European Union. Our working group embarked on a crucial mission to dissect the implications of populism in four countries for young people, educators and to comprehend its implications for European values. With a multidisciplinary approach spanning sociology, political science, pedagogy, and psychology, the group sought not only to comprehend the complexities of this phenomenon but also to provide practical contributions and insights for educators grappling with the populist challenge. To unravel the relationships between populism and education, the collective research explored the experiences of four European countries: the Republic of North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Ireland.

The working group recognised the nuanced nature of populism, and through the diverse expertise of its members who came from North Macedonia, Ireland, the UK, and Greece it aimed to explore the differentiated impact of populist ideologies within schools and education across these countries. We distinct parts of Europe including members of the European Union (Greece and Ireland), an aspiring member (North Macedonia) and a recent ex-member (UK). While we were all part of a shared European culture, our countries differed markedly in terms of geography, wealth and income, population, and belief systems. Each case study offers a unique narrative, reflecting the complex interplay between populism, societal dynamics, and educational landscapes.

Each case study is organised so that it addresses the different understandings of populism in each country, the respective experiences of populism amongst children and young people, how populism is addressed, or not, in the curriculum and in teaching, the particular challenge for teachers and national educational system and the relationship between populism and educational values. All the case studies draw on primary qualitative research with teachers as well as making extensive use of the conceptual work on populism and relevant secondary research. To varying degrees, the group became aware of the limited research that directly investigates populism, young people, and education. As such the current report, we believe makes an important contribution to an underexplored area.

## Overview

The constituent case study reports emphasise how in recent years, the term ‘populism’ has permeated the public, political, and academic spheres across the consortia. The reports demonstrate that there are no universal approaches to identifying and dealing with issues around the increasing negative influences of populism. Each of the countries reported that that this is a complex and multifaceted occurrence which takes on distinct variations in political practices and is bound up in culture, history, politics, and globalisation. Many of the countries used Mudde and

Kaltwasser's (2017) definition of populism as a catalyst for the interviews with their respondent focus groups and interviews. Cas Mudde (2007) describes populism as a 'thin-centered ideology' dividing society into the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' finds resonance. This ideology comprising a moral view of the common people, anti-elitism, and support for direct decision-making, manifests in conspiracies, anti-vaccine movements, and national-chauvinistic expressions was echoed through the research across the consortium.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the prevalence of populist attitudes is deeply rooted in historical, societal, and economic contexts. Contextual factors such as a relatively short history of democratic governance, low media literacy, and prolonged economic, social, and political crises have contributed to the widespread demand for populist politics. Despite the term "populism" being pervasive in public discourse, its nuances have seldom been explored, leading to a lack of clarity that seeps into educational realms. The narrative of North Macedonia's educational struggle against populism unfolds against a backdrop of societal distrust, economic challenges, and the malleability of populist narratives to fit diverse value systems. The research conducted among History and Civic education teachers reveals a partial reflection of the public's rough usage of the term. These educators associate populism with various dubious practices such as bribery, and deceitful promises before and during elections. While acknowledging populism's appeal to ordinary people, the respondents perceived it as a tool used by political elites for personal gain. The teachers' deep distrust in democratic institutions and belief in an 'us versus them' division underscore their vulnerability to populist narratives. In classrooms characterised by underdeveloped civic skills and media literacy, children become susceptible to populist ideas. Social media, acting as echo chambers, reinforce a belief in the moral purity of the 'common people,' fostering intolerance and eroding democratic values. The recent global (and national) economic crisis, coupled with teachers' decreasing societal status, continues to pose a risk of educators becoming conduits for populist narratives. The research in RNM (Republic of North Macedonia) showed that supporting teachers in combating populism is proving challenging due to the varied forms it can take. Populism's adaptability to current events and situations enables individuals with diverse beliefs to align with its 'common righteous people' logic. Moreover, values play a crucial role in understanding populism, as it thrives on a division between conflicting groups. While the research highlights associations between certain values and populist attitudes, a clear set of guiding principles remains elusive. Teachers in the focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with European values, attributing it to perceived violations and spurring potential resentment that could seep into classrooms. The research highlighted that the Republic of North Macedonia grapples with a significant prevalence of populist attitudes, rooted in contextual factors and fuelled by a lack of clarity in public discourse. Educators in this region now face the challenge of navigating a complex landscape, striving to instil critical thinking, democratic values, and media literacy in the face of populist influences.

In Ireland, the research explored the emergence and impact of populism, a phenomenon in Ireland that is currently challenging democratic values, particularly in the context of the authoritarian or EU driven policies. Respondents also defined populism as an ideology that creates a dichotomy between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'. This normative challenge

to European values is manifested in various issues, including the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and anti-vaccination sentiments and more recently, immigration. The war in Ukraine, via the EU Temporary Protection Directive brought these sentiments to the fore after the outbreak of the war, and the increasing need to provide refuge for migrants under the International Protection Act of 2015 arising from the 1951 Geneva Convention. Populist groups have surfaced in response to these issues, with growing support for mainstream parties like Sinn Féin, considered by some as a populist party. The emergence of Sinn Féin challenges conventional notions, as this democratic socialist party continues to gain popularity among young people. Despite historical opposition to the EU, the party is now broadly pro-EU and pro-immigration. Kenny (2017) argued that Ireland, despite being considered fertile ground for populism after the 2008 economic crash, has witnessed it in limited and unusual forms, primarily through protests against water charges. However, since this research commenced in 2021 the Irish case study also highlighted the presence of smaller (but growing) populist groupings, such as the National Party and Ireland First focusing on nationalist, anti-EU, anti-abortion, and anti-immigrant stances. These relatively small groups and parties are gaining societal and political ground and are using social media to spread populist ideologies, such as the Great Replacement Theory<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the need for educationalists to address fake news, misinformation and media responsibility is increasingly becoming a focus of the work of schools, educators, and policy makers. This emphasises the multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of populism, varying across different political cultures and circumstances. Beyond political landscapes, the research explored the role of education, specifically citizenship, democracy, and political education, in addressing the challenges posed by populism. Scholars Estelle and Castellvi (2020) note a lack of interest in linking populism with education, and the Irish study sought to fill that gap by examining teachers' perspectives in post-primary schools in Ireland. The Case Study showed that teachers generally agreed on a working definition of populism, emphasising its divisive nature, but they expressed varying levels of awareness and engagement with the concept in their teaching. The findings revealed that some teachers unintentionally incorporate populist themes into their lessons, reflecting the societal impact of populist ideas on schools. Concerns were raised by the respondents about students' exposure to misinformation through social media, shaping their understanding of crucial issues. Teachers called for a more explicit inclusion of populism in the curriculum, suggesting that it should be integrated into citizenship and political education and highlighted across various subjects. They emphasised the importance of technology-enhanced learning, debates, and fostering critical thinking skills. While there was agreement on the importance of values such as respect, tolerance, and understanding of differences, opinions diverged on whether these were specifically European values. The Irish research sheds light on the nuanced nature of populism, encompassing diverse political ideologies and echoes the findings and sentiments from the other European case studies. It also underscores the crucial role of education, urging a more explicit incorporation of populism into the curriculum to equip students with the skills to critically engage with the divisive narratives prevalent in society.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/08/a-deadly-ideology-how-the-great-replacement-theory-went-mainstream>

Addressing populism through education emerged as a key strategy for promoting democratic values and mitigating the challenges posed by populist movements in Ireland.

The United Kingdom, long seen as a nation of stability and democracy, has experienced a turning point in a post-Brexit Europe. Its image of immunity to populism is also beginning to fray. The UK has a long history in world and European politics, and as the reality of the implications of Brexit emerge, we historical narratives becoming a dominant feature of public and societal discourse. The research highlights that paradoxes begin to emerge, personified by historical figures such as Winston Churchill. Churchill, a pivotal force against Nazism, embodies the contradictions that have haunted British politics, utilising what could be considered populist rhetoric while being grounded in the reality of Nazi Germany. The former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a self-proclaimed heir to Churchill, led an era marked by slogans of the Brexit campaign, exposing the pitfalls of populist governance—scandals, corruption, and incompetence leading to, what can be seen now as, the decay of parliamentary democracy. In the UK this populist surge was not confined to one political party; political parties such as the Conservatives and Labour have had to grapple with internal divisions, losing touch with their ideological foundations. Johnson was instrumental in gaining his Prime Minister role on the basis of 'Making Brexit happen. Though at the time this was hailed as a populist moment, the research has highlighted that in fact it has unfolded as a political fallacy. Promising agency to the people, it deflects attention from systemic issues, resulting in economic and social harm. One of the core values of the Brexit philosophy pointed to immigration as risk against national identity and was politically constructed (by the Populist movement) as a national threat, revealing the manipulative nature of populist narratives. Educationally, schools in the UK are facing challenges in addressing populism. A lack of dedicated time for democratic education, teacher confidence issues, and a rigid curriculum has hindered efforts to counter the populist influence. The Department for Education's reluctance to provide resources further complicates the struggle. Viewing populism through the lens of European values, once again it emerges as a lean ideology (Mudde, 2007), not tethered to specific principles. The struggle to reconcile populism with democracy intensifies as populists in power make undemocratic attempts to control media and judiciary. As in the other countries the rise of misinformation, fake news and politically driven and targeted news and media can be seen as one of the most visible threats to democracy and feeds the populist narrative. In this narrative, educators are increasingly pivotal in defending democratic values and fostering empowering citizenship education. The threads of populism, woven into the fabric of UK history, prompt a re-evaluation of the nation's democratic foundation, questioning its resilience in the face of populist challenges.

In Greece, populism emerges as a mobilising force against perceived threats, inequalities, or oppression by established elites. The phenomenon gained prominence during Greece's well-publicised economic hardships and political turmoil in recent years, capitalising on the disenchantment of those who feel failed by existing systems. The central tenet of populism pits "the people" against "the elite" or "the establishment," simplifying complex issues and resonating with citizens disenchanted with traditional political processes. The significance of the Greek case lies in its contribution to academic understanding, shedding light on how populism



affects various aspects of Greek society, including education, media, and social relationships. Similar to the other countries in the research the historical context plays a major role in how Greek society views itself and creates its own national identity. The Greek case study integrates populism into the context of permacrisis, a sustained conundrum of economic, social, and political crises. The research highlighted how the welfare state, designed to safeguard citizens, faces challenges in balancing social policies with economic sustainability. Examining the Greek 'Crisis Continuum', the research identified how permacrisis transforms the welfare state and impacts education, especially affecting young people. The analysis of the rise of populism in the country extends to the emergence of 'Trumpism', a distinct brand of populism exemplified by the former U.S. President, Donald Trump. Characterised by nationalist rhetoric and anti-establishment sentiment, Trumpism resonated with segments of Greek society feeling left behind by globalisation, and further exemplified by the EU imposed austerity measures from 2010 to 2017, many of which continue today. The research revealed that both teachers and students in Greece are familiar with populism, associating it primarily with politics. Concerns were expressed about its influence in schools, where the divisive 'us vs. them' dichotomy can manifest. The research participants advocate for protecting children from populist politics and acknowledged the difficulty of implementation. The case study of Greece emphasises that populism, while familiar to participants, remains a complex and evolving phenomenon, deeply rooted in history and the role of the European Union through the backdrop of globalisation. The Greek research team highlight the necessity for ongoing investigation and research for a further exploration of populism in the national and European context. The findings highlight the need for continued scrutiny and understanding of populism's impact on education and society at large.

We conclude with a brief summary of key findings that highlight how education has become a key 'site' of conflict over the trajectory of populism and how it can be addressed in democratic societies. While populism can appear radically democratic in how it evokes 'the people', on our view is that contains powerful anti-democratic ideas and practices that must be addressed in schools for children and young people to flourish as citizens.

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## Case study: Republic of North Macedonia

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### Understandings of populism in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM)

In the last several years, the term populism became one of the most used terms in the public sphere in politics and journalism as well as in the academic sphere. In its “double hermeneutics”, to use the famous Giddens’ construct on the two-way relationship between everyday concepts and the same used in social sciences, populism has many different explicit and implicit meanings. Moreover, there are many specific forms in which populism in the political realm is practiced locally. There are instances where the term populism is used to designate a style of political representation (Bossetta, 2017 *inter alia*), or some political movements (Jansen, 2011 *inter alia*). The multiplicity of meanings of the term also reflects in the realm of social psychology, where the focus is shifted from the “supply” to the “demand” aspect of populism and accordingly, it is more frequently operationalized as a personal attitude (Hawkins et al., 2020) than as a way to practice politics or a political rhetoric.

In their efforts to identify the underlying elements common to the many forms of populism, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p.4) define it as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. Following that logic, acceptance of populist attitude would mean that one believes that “common people” are inherently virtuous, whereas the elites, especially in the realm of politics are corrupt and oriented towards satisfying its own interests on the expense of the ordinary citizens. Consequently, the political decisions should rely on a direct expression of the general will of the common people (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). To sum up, there are three elements that taken together define populism as thin ideology are (1) an understanding of the ‘common people’ as being similar and morally pure (2) a strong anti-elitist sentiment and (3) support for practicing direct decision making by the ‘common people’ themselves (Wirth et al., 2016).

Having this definition in mind, one could say that in the Republic of North Macedonia, similarly as in the whole Balkan region (Bieber, 2021; Kmezić and Bieber, 2017), populist views are widely accepted. At least three recent publications (Bliznakovski et al., 2021; Rechica et al., 2023, Kenig



2023) confirm that the vast majority of citizens support the core populist ideas, making the country one where the *demand* for populist politics is considerably high. The most obvious ways of articulating populist views are within different variations of conspiracism, like anti-vaccine or anti-gender movements, as well as expressions of variations of national-chauvinism. Not less importantly, populist demand is present in people's expectations of how the country should be governed, their political preferences and the voting behaviour.

This large prevalence of populist attitudes in the country relies on many different contextual factors, among which two are especially important. First, given that the state has a relatively short history of democratic governance, the 'civic skills' are not yet well developed. Compared to other European countries, the media literacy of the population is at the very bottom<sup>1</sup> which makes citizens particularly vulnerable to fake information and rhetorical manipulations. Not less importantly, the society is in a prolonged period of crises, both economic, social, and political, which by itself has been recognized as an indispensable condition for a high degree of populist attitudes endorsement (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2013).

Despite the frequent use of the terms 'populism/populist' in the social sphere, they are rarely explained, or discussed in depth in the public discourse, predominantly in the media. Its usage is reduced to designating an undesirable acting of the political opponents which almost 'by rule' is insufficiently or not at all operationalized. In other words, little is said on how the actors on the political scene are being populist.

Findings from our initial qualitative research, conducted on a small sample of History (3 participants) and Civic education teachers (3 participants) in primary schools, suggest that the roughness in use of the term from the public realm has partially reflected on their understandings of what populism is and what are its consequences in the society. Asked whether they have heard of the term, all participants confirmed that they are familiar with it. However, their explanations on what they think that populism is, were not very far from what could be described as clientelistic practices, bribery and similar corruptive engagements that are misused by political parties in their race for votes. To illustrate what is meant by populism, they were giving examples of such "deceitful promises" to certain target groups of the electorate, or instances where material gifts were delivered to the most vulnerable groups of potential voters prior to the elections. In the words of one of the respondents, such occurrences are very frequent on the current political 'ring' and were exercised in the past as well.

*We have heard so many times during the pre-election period how people from the most underprivileged social groups are bribed with only few bags of flour and sugar. And we were witnessing such things in the past, more or less in the same way it happens now...more than thirty years so that we are all ... almost accustomed to hear promises about things that are going to be better for the people but it never happens afterwards.*

The participant agreed this method is used by all the main political entities in the country. This happens more frequently when they are in power – however, using populist rhetoric along with other tools, like pre-electoral bribery is not excluded in case when they are not.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dw.com/mk/severna-makedonija-na-dnoto-sporod-mediumska-pismenost/a-63422310>

It did not become explicit during the focus group discussion that the participating teachers are aware of populism being defined as a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups. However, when this aspect of populism has been mentioned by the facilitator, they recognized such practices as being present on the country's political scene. Again, teachers confirmed their belief that more often than not, political elites address the concerns of underprivileged groups "only in words", not in real actions. In the words of one participant:

*Ah, we all know that they promise the Earth when trying to get elected and they have no intentions to even try to work on it, they all do it. Beginning from 'banal' things like 'we will repair the infrastructure, to employment possibilities and better living standard. Nobody actually believes in (these promises) and yet, it works somehow, people are desperate for hope.*

The idea that politicians in North Macedonia "work exclusively for their personal interests", as opposed to the general interest, is a belief that the participants agree with. The same applies for the idea that nationalism is very frequently used for manipulative purposes, beginning from political mobilization to distraction from more salient issues like poverty or crimes committed by the 'elites'. Participating teachers also pronounced deep distrust in the democratic institutions of the country and the whole region. In that sense, it seemed that they themselves are also not immune from the belief that there is a deep "us" (ordinary people, where they belong) versus "them" (powerful political elites) division.

One teacher pointed that the main pillar of populism is the corruptness of the media which in many different ways contribute to making populism based on distortion of truth and emotional manipulation a functional tool in the political race. She explains that mainstream media are the ones that are responsible for spreading disinformation and protecting the political elites:

*Look, media are the biggest corporation working coupled with whoever pays them the most. There is no such thing as objectivity in journalism. That is why it is so hard to distinguish reality from fake information...and social network spread it quickly, so it is impossible for one to be out of this impact.*

## **Populism in the classroom**

Taking into consideration that the 'civic skills' and the media literacy are not yet well developed amongst children and young people, in the era of social media influential as never before, children and young people—perceiving themselves as "common people"—are especially susceptible to populist ideas. The belief on 'common people' as being 'similar and morally pure', strengthened through social media's "opinion bubbles", results in a way that children and adolescents are highly convinced that they ("we, the common people") are right (about certain populist idea), making them less tolerant to the opinions of the others. Such tendencies are eroding the prospects to develop pluralistic, democratic, and critical culture in the classroom. The most dangerous tendency as a result, is accepting of conspiracy theories and denial of science, and further decrease in trust in institutions and democratic system.

In such polarization, our focus groups show that powerful elites (from the side of 'supply') are perceived as prone to bribery when in power, while at the same time, "common people" (from

the side of 'demand') are desperate for a "strong hand" and righteous leader. Intriguingly, these opposites could co-exist in adolescents and young people today—as one survey on public opinion in North Macedonia<sup>2</sup> shows: asked what they will do if caught by a police as a traffic offenders, 23.5% of young people aged 18-24 answered they will use connections in order to avoid penalty, what is close to double compared to people of age 55-64 (14.2%). At the same time, if *they are requested* to pay bribery in order to get easier access to some public service, 28.6% of this sample of young people would report the officer to higher instances, compared to 17.8% of adults at 55-64 who will do the same.

Classroom should stay as important place where curriculum and teaching might be powerful tools to develop critical thinking in students with argumentation based on scientifically proven facts. That should be done in concrete contexts, where students will practice pluralistic and argument-based debates.

### **Populism and the educational challenge**

A perception that we live in a serious economic crisis, followed by decrease in societal status of the teachers in the society, for many teachers results with deep decrease in satisfaction with their personal and professional that could easily lead to increased propensity to populist ideas. In such a vulnerable situation, instead of fighting against, teachers could become a channels, or mediators of populist narratives. This risk is especially probable in educational environments with weaker mechanisms of quality assurance in education. In such a circumstances, teachers could turn from a "demand" tracks to "supply" tracks of the populist processes.

In order to support teachers in fighting populism, crucial challenge is that we cannot offer them a definite structure, aspects and variants of populism. Populism will always be possible to take various shapes (and contents) depending on the current situations and events in the world, where "populist logic" will simply adapt to them. As Laclau writes: "Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political" (2005, p. xi).

Such adaptability of populist ideas to variety of current phenomena could create conditions where teachers with whatever beliefs could be able to develop a feeling that they are on the side of the 'common righteous people', and, in order to fight for the "truth" to teach children what is right and wrong from a standpoint of their "logic".

### **Values and populism**

The apparent fact that describing a political actor as being a populist has negative connotation is not apparent only from how populism is understood by 'ordinary' people. This tendency has also been confirmed in the relevant research literature. For example, Stavrakakis (2017) argues that more usually than not, policies labelled as 'populist' and at the same time stigmatized as

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<sup>2</sup> Alsat. (2023). Results on research on public opinion on corruption. Available at:

<https://360stepeni.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Rezultati-od-istrzhuvane-na-javno-mislene-na-tema-sitna-koruptsija.pptx>

irresponsible, irrational, anti-democratic and generally, are loaded with pejorative meaning. Interestingly enough, despite the negative connotation of the term in the public discourse, apparently the vast majority of people are ready to confirm (through research) that they accept the key components of populism, including people centrism, anti-elitism, and the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites.

The idea that there might be a set of personal factors that support proclivity towards populist attitudes is not a new one and there is a body of research showing how different personality traits affect both acceptance of populist ideas and voting for populist parties' decisions (e.g. Bakker et al., 2016; Kenny & Bizumic, 2023; Rechica et al, 2022). Much less attention though has been given to the role of personal values in guiding acceptance of populist attitudes and voting behaviour, despite the evidence that personal values have significant role in making political choices (Shwartz et al, 2010). The reason for this is probably the complexity of the associations between personal values as a source of evaluative judgements on which political attitudes are based on one hand and the many different, sometimes conflicting ideologies that meet the criteria to be called populist on the other. One recent study reveals that voting for populist parties is associated with lower support for self- transcendent values and high support in conservation values regardless of whether the party is left or right oriented (Baro, 2022). Another one, conducted on late adolescents in North Macedonia, revealed only very weak association between certain personal values and acceptance of populism when it is measured as 'generic' as opposed to specific like, for example, right or, left-oriented (Kenig and Spasovski, 2023).

In the lack of more empirical evidence, it could be discussed that both acceptance of populist attitudes and voting for populist parties surely does not happen in a vacuum of value system. Values like inclusiveness, acceptance of the outgroups regardless of how they are identified, certainly are not priority for those who accept populist views. The majority of populist specific movements, like for instance, the anti-feminist or national-chauvinistic, call for a change that might be in itself contradictory because it advocates perseverance of traditional patterns of organizing the society. Hence, one might expect that populist views are at the same time based on conservatism and radicalism as values.

On the other hand, it is well documented that populism is a 'thin' ideology which can be allied to any other belief or value system based on the assumption that, above all, the society is divided into two conflicting, internally homogeneous groups (Mudde, 2004). This is exactly why it could be expected that it is difficult to find a firm value system that unifies all manifestations of populism or voting choices. When being asked how in their view values are connected to populism, especially European values, teachers in our group were not able to identify a clear set of goals that serve as guiding principles in accepting populism. Ironically, some mentioned the distrust in European institutions and values as a potential source of dissatisfaction and proclivity towards believing in the 'quick fix' solutions of the populist narratives. One teacher expressed resentment in words which raises the important question if they themselves are immune against the mainstream populist views:

*Ahh, who is left to believe that EU operates on the values that they promote? How is it democratic that they forced us to change (the country's) name or that they tolerate Bulgaria's veto? The EU values are only lullabies...for small children.*



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Several instances of how European values are explicitly or implicitly violated were given, beginning from the right to self-determination to lack of care for the socially deprived groups. It was also pointed that there is a danger that the distrust in EU and its fundamental values in the public discourse might spill over in the classroom, stressing that in the era of domination of the internet-based socialization, students are vulnerable to extremist positions.

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# Country Case Study: Ireland

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## Understandings of populism in Ireland

The concept of Populism has been identified as a challenge to democracy, tolerance, and European values (Bugarič, 2020). It represents a normative challenge to European values by promoting homogeneity over difference; strong, charismatic leadership over democratic pluralism; and the ‘common-sense’ of the people over elite expertise. It has been defined as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004) that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. It features three core concepts—the people, the elite, and the general will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism is more than the demand for popular sovereignty but contains a specific notion of the people as homogenous, virtuous, and wise (Taggart 2000, Schulz et al 2018). Estelle and Castellvi (2020) speak about authoritarian or national populism which is characterised by a clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and refer to the:

we, the ordinary citizens (the people, the silent majority, the forgotten France, etc.), and they, the distant and corrupt elites. Populist leaders usually promise to give a voice to those who feel that they have been neglected by corrupt elites. It is a movement, therefore, that is questioning hegemonic Western liberal politics (Estelle & Castellvi, 2020: 2).

They go on to speak about ‘the diffusion of demagogic narratives that enhance emotional and visceral reactions instead of rational deliberations and the trivialising of political debate and spread of hate speech through the increasing influence of social media in campaigns’ (Estelle and Castellvi, 2020). Populist groups seek to gain power through division and conflict and by rejecting consensus and compromise. Populists engage in targeting groups regarded as ‘enemies’ of the ordinary people such as mainstream media organisations, members of the judiciary, self-serving members of a global elite, doctors, scientists, immigrants, feminists, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and the EU in a broad range of groups, institutions, and organisations. Populist groups have a strong virtual presence and can be adept at using sophisticated media strategies which deploy simple, targeted messaging which can be disconnected from truth, but which appeals to disenfranchised and marginalised groups in society.



Recently in Ireland, what could broadly be characterised as populist groups have emerged in response to several issues including government handling of the Covid 19 pandemic particularly its use of lockdowns and some anti-vaccination protest although the country has very high vaccination acceptance and engagement. A small number of street protests took place in the earlier stages of lockdown, but these did not attract large crowds, nor did they enjoy any meaningful public support. They were loosely organized by a combination of different groups and individuals mainly drawn from the far-right of the political spectrum.

There is also a considerable amount of ongoing protest on various social media platforms about Covid 19 in general and centred on a range of particular conspiracies that we are familiar with. The recent arrival of people fleeing the war in Ukraine has also led to street and online protests focusing on broader issues relating to an ongoing housing crisis. Disinformation on social media platforms about the origins and status of those seeking asylum protection has contributed to an increase in activity by fringe populist groups.

In the Irish case, there does not appear to be a lot of substantive demographic data for populist groups outside of mainstream politics (due in part to how these groups organize and operate) however there is strong and growing support amongst the 18 to 24 age group in particular and indeed across every age group, for a mainstream party, Sinn Féin, which is the largest party in the State based on a number of opinion polls conducted over the last 2 years.

A democratic socialist party, it would be considered by many commentators to be populist, currently broadly pro-EU (though historically it would have opposed Ireland's membership of the EU and opposed some EU treaties) and pro-immigration. The party is in opposition but would on recent polling appear to be in a favourable position to be in government after the next election. In a recent poll of polls, conducted in September 2023 and asking voters about their voting intentions at the next general election, Sinn Féin polled at 34%, making it the most popular political party in Ireland by some distance (Politico, 2023).

One of these rivals, the Centre-right Fianna Fail party, 'spent 65 of the 79 years from 1932 to 2011 in government, making it one of the most dominant parties in Western Europe. Its status as a populist party is generally uncontested up until 2011' (Suiter, 2017).

There is a small populist right-wing party which has emerged in recent years in Ireland called the National Party. It has a set of core principles which have a nationalist, anti-EU, anti-abortion, and anti-immigrant focus. It is regarded as a minor party and has no elected representative in the parliament. It does not enjoy any meaningful electoral support (hovering around the 1.5% mark) though it does have an online presence that may be more impactful, and the party was visible during the recent anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests despite its very low public support. There is also considerable support for independent members of parliament who campaign mainly on local political issues and smaller, mainly left of centre political parties which could also be considered as populist parties and which campaign on national issues.

Kenny (2017, p.2) argues that due to its experience of austerity after the 2008 economic crash, Ireland would appear to have been considered 'a fertile bed for populism' but that in fact the country witnessed populism 'only in a limited and unusual form' i.e. through protests against water charges. This highlights the idea of populism as multi-dimensional and context dependent. Kenny suggests that Ireland's

unique experience shows the irreducible complexity and locality of populism. Populism is always contingent and local, reacting to the peculiarities of political culture and circumstance. The best way to study populism is not through theory and search for similarity, but through observation of diversity. While we might see some similarity, pattern, and convergence in populism around the world, this is largely happenstance, and populism will always be recast and remade in each and each place to produce distinct and often unpredictable results (2017, p. 2)

For the mainstream political parties mentioned above the smaller, right-wing National Party would seem to resemble populist parties and movements more closely in Europe with its nationalist, anti-immigrant, and socially conservative platform. Sinn Fein, the left-wing, self-avowed populist party, would tend to be dissimilar to those groupings in that it is broadly pro-EU and pro-immigration.

Some commentators argue that in recent times Sinn Fein have moved away from its broader populist positions to become more of a mainstream party.

while Sinn Fein started its journey as a political pariah and still places its aims within the basic populist framework, the party is now firmly in the mainstream. It shares widely held views on the EU and immigration, and even its emphasis on Irish unification is not dissimilar from the general views of other parties (Murphy, 2020).

## **Populism in the classroom: curriculum and teaching**

Education in general, and citizenship education and education for democracy in particular, are important and relevant in a broader context where children and young people are anxious and concerned about their futures in the face of populism, xenophobia, divisive nationalism, discrimination, fake news, and misinformation, as well as the challenge of radicalisation. The broad conceptualisation of civic education is often used to describe 'the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that children are expected to learn to be virtuous and civically productive members of society' (Levinson, 2014, p.1). Education for democracy, according to Biesta (2020) 'raises awareness of ourselves and others, how we act in society, our freedom and the limits that our living together poses to our own freedom' (p.96).

The Irish element of the research fits into a broader European research study which aims to contribute to the operationalizing of the Paris Declaration of March 17, 2015 (Eurydice, 2016), which identified the 'urgent need to cooperate and coordinate, to exchange experiences, and to ensure that the best ideas and practices can be shared throughout the European Union'. According to Estelle and Castellvi (2020) the rise of authoritarian populism in the last few decades

has led to increasing scholarly production related to this topic. It should be noted however, that populism has not aroused much interest among recent educational researchers, despite the long tradition of democratic citizenship education from the early 20th century. As a result, the educational system has rarely been analysed as a factor related to the emergence of populism or as an opportunity to mitigate populism (Estelle and Castellvi, 2020, p.2). It is against this background that the research was conducted in the Irish case which examined the views and perspectives of teachers working in the general Citizenship Education subject area in post-primary schools in the Leinster region. Schools are considered to play an important role as institutions educating young people about democratic principles and to serve as niches for the development of civic engagement (Hüning, 2022).

One of the objectives of the research is to make a practical contribution that supports those working in education and young peoples' organisations as they face the populist challenge. The data gathered was a combination of secondary analysis of literature and expert interviews. Purposive sampling was applied to the target population, ensuring a range of experiences, genders, school-type, and governance. During the interviews, teachers were asked about their understanding of the term populism, if and how it featured in the formal and informal activities of the school, what resources teachers might need to teach about this idea and how education systems might respond to the threats and challenges posed by populism to EU values and to previously accepted notions of knowledge-formation, understanding and expertise. Some of the broader findings outline that teachers need to be responsive and flexible in addressing real world issues e.g. (Ukraine crisis, climate change and refugee issues). Some teachers who are aware of the rise and influence of populism are in a minority and can, at times, feel isolated. Emerging from the data was the concept of the differences between education institutions, the formal curriculum, and the wider political/social culture, particularly in these fast-changing times where political national and European events can determine societal and individual responses.

The teachers who were interviewed were working in the subject area of Civil Social and Political Education, and Politics and Society, subject areas that are concerned with Citizenship Education in secondary schools in the Irish context. They had different degrees of teaching experience and worked in rural and urban settings in secondary schools. At the beginning of the interviews the teachers were asked to consider a working definition of populism which read:

'Populism is understood as a form of politics that emphasises strong differences between an in-group and an out-group – the in-group are considered to be good and virtuous people who are threatened by an out-group. Populist politicians like to create an `us` and `them` (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008) who can be elites, immigrants, the government, the European Union, global business'.

While there was general agreement with the statement, the participants also offered several other observations. They understood the broad appeal of populism to people

*because it sounds like a great idea, because (it) offers something to people. Or maybe they are catching the moment in terms of people's general frustration or anger, or opinion but if they're analysed, they probably*

*don't stand up...as feasible policies or actions, or that they could be dangerous...that they could be xenophobic, or...excluding of people or labelling of people, or stereotyping of people*

Others mentioned that while they were aware of the term it wasn't something that they had thought of in terms of their teaching, with one teacher admitting that 'I think I've been accidentally teaching (about) it without using the term populism for I'd say the last two or three years'.

A series of questions were then asked relating to populism as a phenomenon that influences what happens in schools and how visible it was in their school setting. What might be considered the broader ideas relating to Populism appear to be featuring more noticeably in Irish schools than in previous times and the impact of these ideas is being felt more in classrooms and within the broader life of the school. One teacher responded that 'it can be in schools, because whatever people are hearing at home kind of often feed into their opinions and their attitudes (in school)'. One respondent noted that 'they're probably following Populism without realising that they're doing it, and it is kind of being brought in without them knowing that this is Populism'. Another referred to the influence that the home environment played in developing young people's understanding of populist ideas 'I'd imagine it could be felt at home, and I'd say, that is where it's heard, most likely, and if it is ever heard in school it will be from me'. Referring to the recent arrival of people fleeing the war in Ukraine one respondent reflected that

*maybe more students where their parents are from different backgrounds stuff like that in schools with a lot of Ukrainians students coming into the country...with immigration and things like that people are having to leave their country (and more) is becoming I suppose, known about that.*

Speaking again to the idea of increasing diversity in the school-going population in Ireland one teacher felt that this was not reflected in the teaching cohort '*there's definitely more of a diverse cohort in the school. But that isn't also reflected in the staff. There's quite a lot of older staff in the school as well, who would have had, maybe quite traditional backgrounds*'.

The teacher felt that this might have contributed to a lack of discussion or awareness of populism amongst the staff and when asked if these ideas were spoken about by their fellow teachers responded '*definitely not in the staffroom. They had mentioned some of the protests that have been taking place in the last few months, but it wasn't really a broad discussion, it was kind of in passing*'.

When the teachers were asked how populism might be experienced by children and young people and to give examples of how this was manifested some felt that the young people they were familiar with in their work appear to be experiencing populism and the ideas associated with it through engagement with the social media platforms of some of the more notable populist figures. As pointed out earlier, some of their understanding of these concepts comes from their exposure to them in the home environment. They felt that the students were also critically engaging with and experiencing these ideas through teacher-led and mediated activities in the class. Referring to the hidden curriculum one teacher suggested that



*social media has played a huge impact on their understanding of what regular thought should be...and trying to educate boys on, say, for example, Andrew Tate and some of the things that he is promoting on social platforms has actually dictated the thought process of student from first to sixth year. They mention him, they mention his ideas, it comes out in their essays, it comes out in way they speak to each other.*

This teacher went on to describe conversations they had had with their students and raised concerns about the sources of information that the students were accessing to inform their opinions

*they said, for example, that this is the first time they've had open conversations about (these ideas) which would suggest that a lot of their basic knowledge around some very, very, important issues are stemming from misinformation led by social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.*

Another teacher spoke about their efforts to introduce discussions of populist related ideas into their teaching and said that they had recently asked the students to conduct some guided research on topics they were reading about in the local newspaper because *'they were seeing this on the news, and it was, you know, bringing it in to real life'*.

When asked did they think children should be protected from this kind of politics there was a range of responses to this question but most focused on teachers making decisions about what they considered to be the most appropriate age to introduce these topics and the depth of detail they should go into to deliver this material *'discussing those issues I won't avoid this. But it may not go into as much detail at first year. Second year. I think definitely a change upwards'*.

The teachers were asked where they thought politics in general might be effectively addressed in the curriculum and they responded that they found that it is addressed across a number of subjects in the Irish secondary system. One answered

*definitely in geography. Again, like obviously at that senior cycle level regional geography and economic geography, you have a lot of political content, a lot of material around the human development index, gross national income, those kind of aspects of the course...sociodemographic and socioeconomic areas of the course*

While another teacher remarked that *'the cross-curricular aspect is perfect in terms of, for example, could I teach about a political regime and how am I going to relate that back to English'*. When asked how *populist politics* might feature as a formal part of the curriculum, they felt that it should feature more prominently and obviously in the curriculum, that it should feature in dedicated areas of the broader Citizenship curricula in secondary school and that it should also be highlighted and emphasised in other subject areas. The teachers suggested several ways that the subject could be taught and what resources might be helpful in this regard. There was an emphasis on using technology enhanced learning and on ensuring that the particular values that feature in Citizenship education courses should be mirrored in the pedagogical approaches to help create democratic and inclusive learning spaces.



*I think YouTube would be massive, because I think it'll be really important, for example, to actually show them videos of what political leaders do or what they say, or news articles or propaganda, news channels, or certain interviews... one methodology that I would use would be debates.... I think it would be important for them to make up their own mind to develop their own autonomy*

The final set of questions related to what the teachers felt were the most important values to them as teachers and to then consider if these values were particularly European.

Teachers spoke about the importance of respect for others, tolerance, understanding of difference, and acceptance of opposing viewpoints. There was less agreement on whether these were particularly European values. It was felt by most of the teachers that the values that they wished to instil in their students were universal values as opposed to being particularly European.

## Conclusion

*For younger generations populism is the 'normal' – they experience politics as highly polarized and emotive. The problems and concerns of young people, particularly the marginalized, are ignored or they are manipulated. They experience this crisis of European values at a point in which identity formation is being constructed – how do they find their values in this context?*

A number of recent European and global events have given rise to an increase in populist expression and sentiment in Ireland. The manipulation of these events by populist groups on the fringes of the political landscape, their skilful use of social media in particular and the appeal of simple but effective messages to some in society who feel they have been marginalised, disenfranchised, and overlooked poses challenges to civil society. One of the ways that societies can respond to these challenges is through their education systems and particularity through specific curricular approaches. Teachers are responsible for devising and implementing such approaches so their understanding of how these can be used to address such phenomena as the rise of populism is important to determine.

It would appear from the research carried out in the Irish case that populism as a concept should feature more clearly in the curriculum and that teachers should engage with their learners about these ideas in ways that more accurately reflect how young people are accessing and processing such information at a time in their lives when they are perhaps most vulnerable and their futures most uncertain.

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## Case study: UK

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### Understandings of populism in the UK

For many years the United Kingdom was viewed as immune to populism and viewed as a bastion of stability with a long democratic tradition. Often referred to as the 'Whig' version of history, this perspective considered the UK to have evolved peacefully with industrialisation from a feudal agricultural society to a democratic constitutional monarchy that was built around consensual support for elites drawn largely from the aristocracy and emerging industrial middle classes. This hegemonic historical narrative saw 'Britain' (the name often used despite excluding Northern Ireland) progress into the twentieth century as the defender of liberalism and democracy in the two World Wars, and especially with the defeat of fascism, which became a defining feature of post-War British national identity. On this view, the UK had consistently avoided the extremes of left and right that had been so destructive on the continent and very much began to see its place in the post-war world alongside the United States in a 'special relationship' defending the 'free' world. In key respects, the politician who most embodied the idea of the UK as an historically progressive force for good in the world was Winston Churchill, who both in his speeches and books provided a vision of the country that was able to capture the hearts and minds of many. Churchill consistently connected Britain's past and present as one of a glorious and unified people as when he famously quoted Shakespeare's John Gaunt in Richard II speech referring to England as this: 'this scepter'd isle' and 'happy breed of men' on a 'precious stone set in the silver sea ...'. For Churchill the words moved 'us not only because they are beautiful, but because they are true—as true today in the reign of King George the Fifth as they were under Royal Elizabeth' <sup>1</sup>.

The irony however was that Churchill, who was undoubtedly pivotal to the defeat of Nazism, was himself a strong supporter of British imperialism as a civilizing mission, which included ideas of racial superiority (James 2013). He believed that the British had saved Indians from barbarism and resisted any moves towards independence, referring to Hindus as a 'foul race'. He supported Zionism on the grounds that Arabs were an inferior race to the Jews. In the figure of Churchill, probably the most famous anti-fascist of all time but also a passionate colonialist, we can begin to observe some of the paradoxes that have haunted British politics post-Second World War.

Churchill employed what we might today see as populist rhetoric, constructing the idea of a unified British people against an external threat, but his politics were not populist as they were

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<sup>1</sup><https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-131/riddles-mysteries-enigmas-quoting-shakespeare-and-moore/>



rooted in reality in ways that cannot be said for today's populists. The threat he referred to was the reality of Nazi Germany controlled by foreign elites who were by any standards morally and ethically reprehensible. Moreover, the British people he was preparing for war were certainly romanticised but underlying the rhetoric was a relatively homogenous and stable national community organised along legitimised lines of class and status established with industrialisation (Halsey 1986). While class interests were firmly represented by the different political parties, there was an underlying consensus on the 'Westminster model' of government, which powerfully endorsed elite power and viewed sovereignty as located in the monarch and, thereby, Parliament rather than the people. In key respects, therefore, the British political tradition lacked a fundamental reference point of populist ideology, which was the idea of popular sovereignty.

Boris Johnson, British Prime Minister from 2019-22, very much saw himself in the mould of Churchill and published a book on the wartime leader in 2014. Johnson strongly identified with Churchill's leadership qualities, particularly his emotional and intuitive style as well as his willingness to challenge establishment views. While for Churchill it was appeasement, for Johnson it was the UK's membership of the European Union. Johnson was the archetypal British populist, an able orator who knew the power of rhetoric and with a simplistic and romantic appreciation of British history, evident in his account of Churchill. Johnson then became the perfect mouthpiece for the populist slogans of the Brexit era such as 'take back control' and 'get Brexit done'. While Johnson certainly had populist appeal, his time in office was characterized by scandals, corruption, and incompetence. A system of parliamentary democracy seemed to have decayed into a peculiar populist democracy that allowed Johnson, the fake Churchill, to come to power. In office, Johnson's administration lacked consistent policies and a programme of government, it was a throwback to an 18<sup>th</sup> century court with shifting alliances and factions (Seldon and Newell, 2023).

Johnson was the third out of five Conservative Prime Ministers between 2016-2023 that highlighted the extent to which the UK was no longer synonymous with stable and consistent government. The success of the Brexit 'Vote Leave' campaign placed populism at the heart of the Conservative party but culminated in the party becoming dominated by division and factions which had lost touch with its ideological underpinnings. During the same period, the Labour party struggled with its own brand of left-wing populism when Jeremy Corbyn, a left-wing MP long of the margins of the party became leader. The growth of populism in British politics reflects a long-term crisis in the political system and in particular the two main parties. Both parties struggle to build stable electoral coalitions as their traditional constituencies have fragmented. Core blocs of traditional Conservative and Labour voters have declined, and third parties including those on the populist radical right have taken advantage of increasing voter disillusionment with the political mainstream. The UK is an increasingly complex, multi-national society with divisions between regions and entrenched structural inequalities that have been exacerbated by years of austerity. This can be viewed as a part of a bigger trend in which large organised political parties that emerged with industrialisation and connected the institutions of government to an increasingly educated citizens have lost their foothold with the dominance of a global techno-capitalism, that corresponds with institutional decay. On the surface populism seems to offer a solution, it sets itself apart from the established elites and institutions that are

increasingly impotent in the face of rapid economic and social change. It seeks to democratise by its appeals directly to the people and its faith in their goodness. In the UK the Brexit vote seemed to be such a populist moment of political agency. The people were finally allowed a voice and directly challenged those distant elites and experts that had no appreciation of their lives but felt they had the right to tell them what to do. Yet to hang the problems of the UK on the European Union was a political fallacy but one that perfectly fitted a long-standing populist Euroscepticism that had dominated the UK since membership of the then 'Common Market' (Gifford, 2014). Brexit is typical of populism. It successfully generates political momentum and energy around an issue that could appear fundamental to people's lives that in reality offers little if anything as an explanation and cause of their dissatisfaction. Hence when it was taken away and the UK was no longer a member of the EU, the NHS was in a worse crisis than ever, immigration continued to rise and people's living standards declined. All evidence points to Brexit as an act of self-inflicted economic if not cultural and social harm.

Similarly, with immigration which has been an economic necessity for the UK economy since the end of Second World War, has been politically constructed as a national threat by elites who have consistently adopted anti-immigrant attitudes on the unproven assumption that they reflect views of real people. A position that legitimises and essentialises societal racism and undermines progressive policies and grassroots movements that have done so much to create a society enriched by its diversity. Elites have been adept at using immigration, or more specifically 'race', as a politically expedient way of re-imagining the UK's political and societal crises. Paul Gilroy argued that by the 1980s discourses of black illegality had taken hold:

They provide at a visceral level contradictory, common-sense explanations, symbols, and signs which render the shock of Britain's loss of status intelligible and enable it to be lived out in 'racial' terms. The fundamental process of fragmentation and chaos engendered by the crisis are contained in the images of a disorderly and criminal black population (Gilroy 1987, p.75). Gilroy also noted that while the 'black presence' has been consistently evoked as a source of problems, its precise shape and dimensions changes as political forces shift. In the context of Brexit, narratives of immorality and illegality applied to black communities were repackaged and applied to white European migrants who had come to the UK under the right to free movement in the EU. In particular, migrants from central and Eastern Europe were blamed for the unemployment of British workers, the rise of criminal gangs in urban areas, housing shortages and exploiting the welfare system. These sentiments subsided post-Brexit, but Conservative politicians seemed quick to create a new migration 'crisis' out of people coming to the UK on boats from France. The relatively small number of vulnerable people, often fleeing political persecution, was called an 'invasion' by Home Secretary Suella Braverman<sup>2</sup>. She claimed 'the law-abiding patriotic majority have said: Enough is enough', despite growing evidence that the UK population has become more supportive of migration with large numbers entering the UK from Ukraine and Hong Kong with little public attention.

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<sup>2</sup><https://news.sky.com/story/bravermans-battling-performance-delighted-supporters-but-shes-not-out-of-trouble-yet-jon-craig-12735381>

Post-Brexit populism has been at the centre of the Conservative party's governing strategy. This involves pursuing issues that are considered to be indicative of the people's will, presented in highly simplistic and binary terms, while lacking intellectual or ethical validity. Perpetuating ideas of 'us' and 'them' overrides concerns with the truth. On back tracking on UK's commitment to reducing carbon emissions, the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak claimed to be putting a stop to policies that in reality did not exist such as a meat tax, car sharing and people having multiple recycling bins. The main aim of Sunak's policy un-turn was indicative of populism as it sacrificed rational policy making for a political strategy that necessitates polarisation, in this case those concerned about the environment become 'special interests' that want to force the British people to do things they don't want. The need to polarise is central to populism and Conservative politicians have continuously shifted the focus on to different groups who are imagined as a threat; from 'Remainers', to migrants, to transpeople, to 'woke' teachers. Meanwhile, the absence of rational and effective public policy, the UK becomes more unequal, divided and crisis-ridden. It is therefore against this political context that we must consider populism and the experiences of children and young people in the UK.

### **Experiences of populism amongst children and young people**

There remains a dearth of in-depth research experiences of populism amongst young people and children. This is arguably because populism is assumed to appeal primarily to older age groups who feel 'left-behind' by rapidly changing societies. Younger groups are considered more likely to support liberal and progressive views, while older groups are turning populist in defence of conservative and authoritarian values. In *Cultural Backlash* Norris and Inglehart (2019) argued that there is intensified value polarization between older and younger groups as societies liberalise and once dominant groups find themselves as minorities. In much of the literature that explores this relationship between age and populism, a rather stereotyped view of young people begins to be seen. They are often presented as more in tune with social and economic change and open to new cultures and ideas. Indeed, they can be presented as the 'winners' of globalization, better educated and more skilled at navigating complex, technologically dominated societies. In contrast older groups are considered to be nostalgic for the past, perhaps having experienced deskilling or unemployment as a result of automation and threatened by the increased diversity they see around them.

David Goodhart's (2017) *The Road to Somewhere* referred to a UK society divided between two groups: 'citizens of anywhere' and 'citizens of somewhere'. The affluent cosmopolitan 'anywheres' were comfortable with the dynamism and diversity of the modern world. They were mobile, having moved from they were brought up to go to university, and they valued autonomy and self-realisation over community and tradition. In contrast, the national 'somewheres' experienced jobs going overseas, living standards being eroded and communities fractured by immigration. They were rooted through family and social connections to the towns and suburbs in which they had often grown up but were nostalgic for a world that had been lost and regretted the passing of more traditional ways of life. They became more intolerant and authoritarian in their views as they witnessed globalisation and multiculturalism directly threaten their moral

order. Age therefore is considered to be central to this divide and mapping onto new cleavage formations with young generations more likely to be educated cosmopolitans and the older generations as marginalised nationalists.

Yet the position of younger age groups as globalization ‘winners’ is problematic (Gifford 2021). In the UK evidence points to many young graduates ending up in low-skilled occupations in the UK (Jennings and Stoker 2017 p.363) and carrying considerable debt burdens. These groups are increasingly coming late to many of the markers of adulthood such as home ownership. Neither is the relationship between younger age groups and progressive values conclusive. Long-term trends in the UK do not support the idea that young people are becoming more socially liberal than previous generations, and, in this regard, the UK is in line with broader European trends:

the data do not support the claim that in European societies, younger and older cohorts stand on two sides of a cultural conflict in which the old defend authoritarian, and the young libertarian, values. Instead, all birth cohorts tend to agree in principle but differ in the degree of support – and a majority in each group supports libertarian and allegedly authoritarian values at the same time. These findings make it unlikely that societies have reached a tipping point at which the libertarian youth push aside the generation of their parents and grandparents, who turn towards populist parties in disappointed self-defence (Schäfer, 2021 p.7)

While populism is not considered a youth specific problem, young people are clearly not immune from its attraction as demonstrated in elections and large-scale surveys. However large-scale data tells us little about the complexity of young people’s relationship to populism. As Loughran and Ross (2023) point out young people are constantly experiencing and negotiating values in their everyday lives, and it is within these specific contexts that they will become exposed to populist ideas. On this view, the rise of populism and its varied expressions will be part of the milieu within which the political socialization and identity formation of recent generations takes place. In the UK, all those under the age of fourteen will only have experienced Conservative governments and their formative years would have been spent during the populist turn that ‘Brexit’ unleashed.

### ***The Case of Andrew Tate***

As noted, populism has not been identified a problem specific children, young people, schools and education. The study of populism has largely neglected its impact on these groups and areas with its focus on the ‘typical populist’ as old and alienated. The case of Andrew Tate represents an interesting and worrying example of how populism can become a youth focused issue and one that presents a particular challenge for education<sup>3</sup>. Tate is an ex-kick boxer turned social media influencer whose videos have been watched by millions. He puts forward misogynist views, that

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<sup>3</sup> Sources *The Guardian*

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/feb/02/andrew-tate-twisted-ideology-infiltrated-british-schools>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/apr/29/talk-pupils-misogynist-andrew-tate-teachers-schools-england>

not only emphasise men's superiority over women but condones violence against them. Tate employs social media to portray his lavish lifestyle alongside a torrent of sexist rants, this is used to attract young men to his online schools with how to get rich schemes which include procuring women for sex work. Tate has been cited as part of the reason for the rise in reports from teachers of misogyny and sexual harassment from boys as young as nine. Reports include a girl locked in a cupboard by four nine-year-old boys threatening to 'fuck her in the throat' and then made her watch porn video clips. At another school, a boy was disciplined for sending a girl a barrage of threatening and explicit sexual messages. A school running harassment workshops in which boys say that taking no for an answer for sex is a sign of weakness. When Tate was arrested in Romania on charges of rape and human trafficking, schools reported boys defending him including claiming that women who went back to his house had, by so doing, consented to sex.

From research conducted for this project with two educators<sup>4</sup>, the issue of Tate was discussed and emerged as an important issue.

*Well, I've discovered, I won't mention the schools, but I often get invited into do school assemblies, and I've often heard people like Andrew Tate quoted so that these young men will have this idea that to be a man is to have dominance over other people. So in a sense, testosterone is used as a justification to have domination over people....and I've found that very, very worrying. (Higher Education Secondary School Outreach Lead)*

Albeit extreme, the Andrew Tate example has all the hall marks of contemporary populism with his employment of social media to spread post-truth and polarising messages laced with conspiracies that young men are turned into powerless victims by gender equality. Tate offers an alternative online 'education' designed to groom boys and young men into an alternative culture of popular misogyny.

### **Populism in the classroom: curriculum and teaching**

The question arises is how well prepared are UK schools and teachers to address such phenomena as Andrew Tate. The Guardian<sup>5</sup> reported that the response to the Tate phenomenon from the Department for Education (DfE) was not to encourage discussion and that it refused to provide any training or resources. This seems counter to DfE advice in 2015 that recognised Schools as a key locale for addressing extremism and that they should be 'a safe environment for discussing controversial issues.' However, when this advice was drawn up the focus was on Islamic extremism and reflected concerns about the radicalization of young Asian men. It appears that Schools have little in place to address the new forms of extremism that are associated with the growth of populism and the rise of figures such as Tate.

While citizenship and democratic education have had a statutory place in the English curriculum since 1998, there is limited evidence of dedicated classroom time for democratic education. A

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<sup>4</sup> The interview was with a Primary School Teacher and Higher Education Secondary School Outreach Lead and was carried out on Zoom for 50 minutes.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/apr/29/talk-pupils-misogynist-andrew-tate-teachers-schools-england>

large-scale survey of teachers and parents in 2021 for the All Party Group on Political Literacy, came to the following conclusions on the state of democratic education in England:

Democratic education is a peripheral feature of secondary education in English schools. There are also inequalities in provision that favour students in fee-paying schools or maintained secondary schools serving affluent communities. Competing demands on time, expertise, and curriculum content are identified by teachers as the three biggest obstacles to effective democratic education in English secondary schools' (Weinberg 2021 p.9)

In addition, while teachers feel responsible for developing young people's political literacy and are being asked to deliver democratic education in some form, the Report found that only 1% feel fully prepared to do so and less than a fifth feel 'very' confident when teaching sensitive or controversial issues.

From the research carried out for this project, what is evident is the constraints on the curriculum and the demands on teachers to deliver a highly prescriptive curriculum. The primary school teacher interviewed reflected that,

*it's good if discussions and topics can be integrated within the curriculum, but it is hard if something happens on the news and they want to talk about it the next day. It's hard to fit in a space or a time. You've got to sacrifice something to do that*

And she went on to give the following example:

*And there's no space for any of that now. So if you go out and see something or one of the children bring something in. So for example, one of the boys this week has become obsessed with the continents and the world and the countries, and every day he's gone home and drawn the continents or the world, really amazing, brought them all in. And I don't have the space in the curriculum or the timetable to make a deal of it as I'd like to.*

Similarly, our Higher Education Outreach Leader stated that,

*I mean, I worry about the United Kingdom at the moment, what they've done to teachers. I worry about how teaching is regulated, the way it undermines teaching, not just in schools, but in universities as well*

In summary while there is an expectation that schools address political and controversial issues, the reality is that this is severely limited by teachers who lack confidence and the necessary training, alongside a highly regulated and pressurised curriculum in which citizenship education is neither valued nor prioritised. It should be noted much of the research drawn up here reflects the English experience and that citizenship education is delivered in different ways across the four nations of the UK. Of interest is the greater focus on global citizenship and whole school approaches in Scotland and Wales, which has arguably been used to promote the separate national identities of the devolved nations of the UK (Beauvallet 2016). In Scotland global citizenship education became a vehicle for mobilising young people to vote in the 2014 independence referendum which had extended the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds (Beauvallet 2016 p.8).

Since the 1998 Crick Report attempted to establish a national consensus on democratic and citizenship education, the reality has been politically driven agendas that reflect the concerns of different governments rather than needs of children and young people. In conclusion, despite

the extent to which populism, and its associated problems of a post-truth and polarising politics is now the everyday experience of new generations across the UK, it is not adequately addressed in schools. The next section discusses what can be done about this.

## Populism and the educational challenge

The All Party Group on Political Literacy identified a number of challenges faced by Schools in delivering democratic education and these would need to be addressed before populism can begin to find a place in the curriculum (Weinberg 2021). Their Report noted that the importance of an open classroom climate for enabling students to deliberate different viewpoints and engage in dialogue on sensitive and controversial subjects within a safe environment. It goes on to argue that the issues that now dominate adult political debate in the UK such as Brexit, gender identity, religious freedom should come under the remit of democratic education (Weinberg 2021 p.27). However, the Report highlighted that the main obstacle to this is teacher expertise and there is a need to build a critical mass of specialist teachers able to expand provision across schools facilitate meaningful and impactful political learning (Weinberg 2021 p.40). This implies a significant scaling up of democratic education within the current initial teacher training frameworks.

Evidence from the Report highlighted the extent to which many teachers, particularly in the Humanities, already encourage an open classroom climate and that pockets of excellence exist across the sector that can be built upon. In line with this, our research participants were able to identify innovative ways in which populism could be addressed in Schools. Our primary school teacher noted that this would be difficult with younger age groups, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, who may not have much exposure or understanding of the issues raised. Nevertheless, she was able to come up with classroom methodologies, appropriate for this group:

*Disagreeing, disagree, agree. Basically in a nice way. I was thinking there's a key stage one book about a group of friends disagreeing in a nice way. Do you know what I mean? Lovely. We might not be able to say, you need to disagree in a nice way, but there is a book somewhere that will teach them that.*

Also, she discussed how issues of evidence and facts can be raised in literacy classes with 6-7 year olds:

*Yeah. Well, like in literacy for example, in year two, we do start talking about the sources that you found information from and start. Is that a reliable source? Is it somebody's opinion or is it somebody's fact? And I think even though it's obviously, for example, the Andrew Tate thing, obviously without saying his name there, you can imply the stuff that you see on Instagram, or if mom's scrolling on Facebook, is that somebody's opinion that you're looking at? Or is it something from somewhere that's trusted? So maybe in a subtle kind of way, we can start getting them to question.*

The HE Outreach Leader for Schools discussed his experiences of education in Ireland and with reference to the Andrew Tate issue, highlighted the importance role models:

*I always felt we had teachers who offered very, very strong leadership in harnessing what was absolutely teenage male masculinity and channeling it into something which was productive and....based in a kind of civic responsibility to our world, to the society we were growing up in.*





He went on to emphasise the importance of historical understanding for an appreciation of current events:

*I think if you can establish those cultural reference points for them, they'll realise that this game of power, populism....has been gone a very, very long time. And that's what's important is that we have a population that's educated enough to notice it and therefore avoid its pitfalls.*

In particular he highlighted the profound impact that knowledge of local history could have on young people:

*Well, I'm kind of thinking how important it is for this to be local. I'm conscious on the Southeast London here. I mean, the heroes for me would be like the East Enders who decided to stand up against the fascists in Cap Street and defend the Jewish population there. And I think when you hear somebody really burning with love and concern for their fellows, telling that story.... a kid hears that they know what side they want to be on, that's a really important question for all of us to face. What side of history do I want to be on here?*

Developing a curriculum that can address populism means harnessing the ideas of those who know what can work in the classroom. Alongside this it is important to draw on the range of independent organisations in the UK that offer expertise in supporting schools to address particularly challenging areas. For instance, in attempting to counteract the impact of Tate and his toxic ideas on masculinity, some schools were able to turn to the community interest company Men at Work, which facilitates ten constructive dialogues with boys and young men around issues of empathy, respect and safety in order to promote resilience and pro-social behaviours<sup>6</sup>, alongside offering training to professionals and organisations to successfully deliver the dialogue programme. Diversify<sup>7</sup>, a charity based in Rotherham in the North of England, has also supported Schools deal with the Tate issue by providing workshops on issues of misogyny and consent. Diversify use open discussion, role plays as well as information giving sessions to address a range of sensitive and challenging areas that face schools such as homophobia and LGBT+ issues, cultural differences, racism, anti-semiticism and Islamophobia, bullying and conflict resolution. In addressing some of the most polarising and controversial topics in contemporary UK society, the work of Diversify provides a powerful example of how populism can be confronted head on in schools.

A source for optimism is that there is capacity within UK schools and civil society organisations to address populism and rise to the threat it poses to children and young people. However, at present it is not seen as a priority for the sector, and this is unlikely to be the case with the mainstreaming of populism in UK politics. In many respects, the case for addressing populism amongst young people and children depends on those in power viewing it as potentially extremist and a possible threat to democratic citizenship. This is difficult when the party in power has placed populist messaging and policies at the heart of its ideology.

## Populism and European values

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<sup>6</sup> <https://menatworkcic.org/training/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://diversifynow.co.uk/school-workshops/>

Populism has been identified as a 'thin' ideology that is not necessarily tied to a particular value or belief system and is why we can find it on the left and right of the political spectrum (Mudde 2004). As political theorists such as Ernest Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) have argued it is principally about how the political is constructed than a set of ideological principles. Populism as a particular kind of political practice consistently divides and polarises society into competing and conflicting groups, which normally places the homogenous and virtuous 'people' against an adversary that represents a fundamental moral threat such as a global elite. Populist leaders position themselves on the side of the people and this can place them at odds with the established institutions that brought them to power which they view as corrupt and self-interested. Populism is perfectly suited to the social media age that gives them unmediated access to large audiences so they can mobilise support and communicate directly with supporters. Its highly emotive and polarising messages are easily consumed and amplified in ways that would have been impossible with traditional media.

While populists have become adept at shaping political debates in a country, this does not mean populism is a straightforward reflection of people's values and how they are expressed. Moral Foundation Theory (MFT) for example understands moral value positions as fundamental moral intuitions that are identifiable across all societies and consistent over time. Drawing upon ideas from anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary biology, the theory categorises five moral "foundations" (and their opposites) common —to varying degrees —to all human beings and societies: care/harm; fairness/cheating; loyalty/betrayal; authority/subversion; and purity/degradation (Haidt 2012). Much of the research on populism has explained its rise in terms of factors such as class, education, and age, yet none of this has proved conclusive as an explanation for events such as the Brexit and Trump votes (Gifford 2021). Populists have proved adept at cutting across social categories and, as we have discussed, its appeal to the young should not be underestimated. Moral Foundation Theory in contrast does suggest that underlying values may be a better predictor of populist support. For instance, those for whom the values of loyalty to country and respect for authority are particularly important may find appealing populist messages about the threats posed by illegal migration. On this argument it is not so much that citizens regularly identify as populists but that the moral values they hold dear are being triggered and cued by populist messaging. As such populists may offer a robust representation for certain value positions within societies, and populist parties are no longer anomalies in European countries. Whether we like it or not, they have become part of the political mainstream including forming governments. Support for populism must be understood as an expression of value positions, which is of particular importance if young people attracted to populism are not to be alienated. However, in some forms and contexts, there remains a question mark over populists' commitment to democracy and the extent to which their politics of polarisation goes beyond normal politics to the point of silencing, if not criminalising and abusing, opposing voices. Evidence from European countries with populists in power point to undemocratic attempts to control the media and judiciary. Poland, when governed by the populists Law and Justice Party, was referred to the Court of Justice for European Union law for supposed violations of EU law with regards to the independence of its judiciary. There remains therefore a significant challenge



in keeping populists in line with European democratic norms and values, which must be robustly defended.

When populism threatens democracy, it becomes a danger to the development of children and young people as responsible and confident citizens. It potentially undermines their freedom to express, negotiate and act upon their values without fear of reprisal and shame. In such scenarios, educators are obligated to call out populist ideas and messaging. The protection and development of an empowering citizenship education that allows for respectful and open dialogue on values remains fundamental to European democracies.

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## **Case study: Populism in Greece**

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### **Understandings of Populism in Greece**

Populism, a political phenomenon that has gained increasing prominence in recent years, is a powerful and influential force in shaping contemporary societies. It is an approach that seeks to mobilize and empower the masses against perceived threats, inequalities, or perceived oppression perpetrated by established elites and institutions. Populist movements often emerge during economic hardship, social discontent, or political turmoil, exploiting the disillusionment of those who feel that the existing systems and authorities have failed to address their grievances (Müller, 2016) adequately.

At its core, populism revolves around the notion of "the people" versus "the elite" or "the establishment." Populist leaders typically portray themselves as the champions of ordinary citizens, positioning their agendas as a direct response to the concerns and aspirations of the ordinary people. They claim to be the authentic representatives of the people's will and use this claim to legitimize their authority and actions (Chwalisz, 2015).

The appeal of populism lies in its ability to simplify complex issues, offering straightforward solutions to multifaceted problems. This reductionist approach resonates with many citizens disenchanted with traditional political processes' perceived complexities and inefficiencies. However, populism's ability to tap into the emotions and frustrations of the masses can also lead to the oversimplification of complex challenges, resulting in policies that may be short-sighted or divisive. Populist movements can take diverse forms and ideologies, spanning the political spectrum. Whether right-wing populism, left-wing populism, or centrist populism, the common thread is the promise of change and the challenge to the status quo. While some populist movements have achieved considerable electoral success and attained power in various countries, others have faced staunch opposition and criticism for their polarizing rhetoric and policies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Its recent of populism surge in Greece can be linked to the economic and political developments of the late 2000s and early 2010s, particularly during the Greek economic crisis. Populist sentiments in Greece began gaining traction in the early 2000s, with dissatisfaction over issues such as economic inequality and perceived political elitism. The global financial crisis of 2008 severely impacted Greece, leading to a deep economic recession. High unemployment, austerity measures, and general economic insecurity fuelled populist sentiments. Greece faced a severe



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debt crisis, leading to bailout agreements with international creditors, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the European Commission. Austerity measures imposed as part of these agreements contributed to social unrest and political discontent. Because of the situation just described, civic groups and formations with a political base were created, which often aroused populist feelings and used populist discourse, dragging citizens into this vortex.

The significance of the study lies in several key aspects. The first significant point is the contribution to academic understanding as we explore its manifestations and implications in Greek society. It sheds light on how populism affects various aspects of society, including education, media, and social relationships. A second aspect is that we can have insight into youth perspectives. The paper provides valuable insights into how the younger generation perceives and responds to populism. As the youth often plays a crucial role in shaping the future of a country, understanding their perspectives is essential for comprehending the broader societal impact of populism.

Then, it has a vital role in the shaping of populism the relation to politics. Populism has been on the rise in various countries worldwide, including Greece. Investigating its influence on Greek society can help policymakers, academics, and the public better understand this political trend and its potential consequences. Except for the above, the paper's findings about the students' perceptions of populism can be relevant for policymakers and universities in Greece. It may help inform strategies and responses to address the challenges posed by populism in educational institutions and broader society. Not only for the universities but also for the schools because we conducted two focus groups, one with primary and secondary school teachers and one more with university students who are future teachers.

Consequently, we had the opportunity to conduct a comparative analysis between teachers and students. We highlight that the paper's use of qualitative analysis and conducting a focus group provides an in-depth exploration of participants' views. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex perceptions surrounding populism.

The rise of populism has been a subject of intense academic study and public debate. Scholars and analysts strive to comprehend its underlying drivers, its impact on democratic institutions, and its implications for social cohesion and governance. Moreover, in an era marked by globalization, technological advancements, and interconnectedness, understanding populism's emergence and appeal has become even more critical in navigating the complexities of the contemporary political landscape.

Overall, the paper's purpose is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on populism, provide insights into the impact on Greek society and the attitudes of primary and secondary school teachers, as also university students, and offer practical implications for addressing this phenomenon in the context of education and beyond.

### ***Unravelling the Nexus: Populism, Permacrisis, Social Welfare State, and Trumpism***

In recent years, the world has witnessed the rise of populism, as we mentioned above, characterized by its appeal to the grievances and frustrations of the masses. Concurrently, the global landscape has been marred by prolonged periods of interconnected crises, often called permacrisis. Within this context, the social welfare state plays a crucial role in providing essential services and social protection to citizens, but not always with success. Moreover, a notable example of populism in recent times is "Trumpism," a term derived from the political ideology and actions of former U.S. President Donald Trump. Examining these concepts together offers valuable insights into populism and its relationship with contemporary societal challenges and political dynamics.

It is necessary to note that the influence of Trumpism, characterized by the political style and policies associated with former U.S. President Donald Trump, can vary across different countries and political contexts. Local dynamics, political culture, and specific issues within each nation influence the impact of Trumpism in Greece or any other country. While some populist movements in Europe and beyond have shown certain parallels with aspects of Trumpism, such as anti-establishment rhetoric, nationalist tendencies, and scepticism toward international institutions, it is crucial to note that Greece has had its own domestic political dynamics and populist movements, particularly in response to economic challenges, austerity measures and flows of migrants.

### ***Populism: A Chorus of Discontent***

Populism emerges in response to perceived injustices and inadequacies in the existing political system. It taps into the frustrations of citizens who feel disconnected from established institutions and promises to represent the "true" will of the people. Populist movements often employ simplistic rhetoric, dichotomizing society into "us vs. them," with "them" representing the elites or establishment. It also risks democratic values, as some populist leaders may undermine democratic norms and institutions in pursuing power (Binder & Blokker, 2022).

### ***Permacrisis: A Persistent Conundrum***

Permacrisis refers to sustained economic, social, and political crises presenting complex challenges to societies worldwide; it is rooted in economic instability, geopolitical tensions, and environmental concerns. Permacrisis erodes trust in traditional governance and exacerbates existing inequalities. Addressing permacrisis requires comprehensive and adaptable policy approaches that account for the interconnectedness of contemporary global challenges.

According to both international and Greek literature, the permacrisis (or the Greek term "Crisis Continuum") (from debt crisis to refugee crisis to today's crises) has had a direct impact on the transformation of welfare state factors, such as education, which has had subsequent repercussion, especially, substantial effects on young people (Gouga, 2021; Panagopoulos et al., 2022). Nevertheless, permacrisis is more than just economic. The "Crisis Continuum" is also a crisis of trust in and institutional reason, transforming the economic crisis into a crisis of democracy (Gouga & Kamarianos, 2011).

The economic downturn resulted in a scarcity of job opportunities for young graduates. Many faced difficulties entering the job market, leading to economic insecurity. The lack of prospects at home prompted some young Greeks to seek employment opportunities abroad, contributing to a phenomenon known as the "brain drain," where skilled individuals leave their home country for better opportunities. Economic challenges and uncertainties can take a toll on the mental well-being of young people. The stress of financial instability and a sense of diminished prospects can contribute to mental health issues. Economic challenges may also delay achieving traditional life milestones, such as starting a family or purchasing a home, as young people may prioritize economic stability over other goals.

### ***Social Welfare State: Safeguarding the Vulnerable?***

Amidst the upheaval of permacrisis and the allure of populism, the social welfare state stands as a crucial support for citizens, but not always. Generally, it embodies the principle of social solidarity, offering essential services and safety nets to those in need. The social welfare state is vital in fostering social cohesion, mitigating inequalities, and promoting equal opportunities. However, balancing social welfare policies with economic sustainability remains a constant challenge, particularly during economic turmoil and political polarization. The transformation of the European welfare state has been a common topic of Greek and international literature since the 1970s. During the 1990s, the White Paper on social policy characterized debate at the level of European institutions. The decline of the welfare state is directly linked to deregulation, liquidity, privatization, and, finally, the consolidation of a differentiated digital capitalist production model. Fifteen years after the global economic crisis, the social subject is faced with new crises repeatedly, through which its realization of this insecurity and uncertainty is even further expanded (Clarke, 2003; Gouga & Kamarianos, 2011).

### ***Trumpism: A Distinct Brand of Populism***

"Trumpism" emerged as a unique brand of populism during the tenure of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States. Characterized by nationalist rhetoric, protectionist economic policies, and anti-establishment sentiment, Trumpism appealed to a significant portion of the American electorate. The movement's focus on immigration, trade, and national identity resonated with many who felt left behind by economic globalization and perceived shifts in the country's cultural landscape. While Trumpism enjoyed support from a fervent base, it also faced criticism for its polarizing nature and divisive rhetoric (Urbinati, 2009).

### ***Interplay and Implications***

The interplay of populism, permacrisis, the social welfare state, and Trumpism highlights the intricate connections between politics, economics, and social dynamics. As permacrisis fuels discontent and disillusionment, populism finds fertile ground to thrive. Within this context, the social welfare state is critical in providing a safety net for vulnerable populations and addressing



socio-economic disparities. Trumpism is a potent example of how populism can influence political movements and policies domestically and internationally. Its impact on the global stage and the enduring challenges of permacrisis underscores the importance of inclusive and sustainable solutions in governance.

Populist movements have capitalized on economic grievances exacerbated by the permacrisis, positioning themselves as defenders of the people and critics of austerity measures. The erosion of the social welfare state has resulted from economic challenges, further fuelling populist narratives. While Trumpism's influence may be limited in Greece, shared themes of anti-establishment rhetoric and nationalist sentiments resonate with specific segments of the Greek population.

### **Populism in the classroom**

The qualitative approach is ideal for exploring complex and relatively unexplored topics. It allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject. The qualitative method's importance and value lie in the researcher's volition to investigate the phenomenon by shifting it from identity to otherness. In other words, it offers the perspective of the phenomenon as it is recorded, understood, and internalized by the subject. Thus, the construction of the research instrument (focus group, discussion grid, categorization, and coding) and, ultimately, the emergence of research data is a joint construction between researcher and researched, between identity and otherness in the fluidity of shifts and final understandings (Babbie, 2010).

We want to insist on what we consider the most important, namely its flexibility, both in the conception and design stage and in the implementation stage of the research project, as the qualitative approach presupposes the relationship of interaction and interdependence between social subjects in space and time, from the meanings and perspectives of otherness to the point where the researcher is surprised by the research findings (Creswell, 1998).

So, in this study, we chose the qualitative approach, as we thought it suited the issue of populism. We conducted focus groups; the first was with primary and secondary school teachers who worked in schools at Patras, and the second was with university students of the Department of Primary Education (who are future teachers). This procedure gave us the perspective to be more precise about our results and concurrently conduct a comparative analysis between these two teams, the teachers, and the future teachers. A thematic analysis was implemented to analyse the collected data, and specific axes were formed.

For the students in our sample who are also future educators currently in the lecture halls and university classrooms, change, technological speed, and the communicative relationship with digital tools are critical dynamic situations. More specifically, they are the kinds of situations that, in turn, shape what scholars call 'the kinds of bonds that are the starting points of common actions and events' (Bayne & Ross, 2007). They differentiate the context in which individuals grow and mature (Merriman, 2015).

We started the focus group with a question about the term populism and if it is familiar to the participants. As we noticed, all participants said they were familiar with the term "populism,"

they reported that they often hear the word in the media. While some of them pointed out that populism was a topic of discussion at schools and universities. We cite some quotes from the participants:

*Participant 7<sup>th</sup>: "It is very familiar to me as a term. I used to know what it meant, but I need help remembering the exact definition. We were very involved with this term in our school and university years."*

*Participant 9<sup>th</sup>: "Populism as a term is familiar to me because I hear it used very often by politicians when they debate or disagree with each other on TV."*

Then we discussed the meaning of populism for them. Populism seems to correspond to hypocrisy, deceit, and the serving of selfish interests. The focus group discussed the concept of populism also as an ideology of specific politicians. So, they connect populism with the political sphere.

*Participant 2<sup>nd</sup>: "... practices that supposedly benefit the people but, in reality, promote political interests on the altar of supposed justice for the people."*

*Participant 3<sup>rd</sup>: "Populism is any effort by personalities involved in political events that aim to embellish events and situations to gain the sympathy and, therefore, the vote of the citizens."*

*Participant 9<sup>th</sup>: "... someone pretends to support the people and fight for their rights when in reality, this one is not interested in the people but only in his interests."*

### **The attitudes of the University students towards populism**

We started the focus group with a question about the term populism and if it is familiar to the participants, as we asked the teachers. We have to highlight that it was difficult for them to tell us something stable about populism, so not all the participants were familiar with the term "populism."

*Participant 6<sup>th</sup>: "I know populism, but I cannot define it precisely, and I do not know if anyone can explain this term."*

*Participant 8<sup>th</sup>: "Yes, I know populism as a term, and it is familiar to me."*

The focus group mainly discussed the concept of populism as a political ideology, there is a strong connection for them between populism, and it could be found in the field of politics.

*Participant 5<sup>th</sup>: "Populism is a form of ideology where the wishes and needs of ordinary people are represented."*

*Participant 9<sup>th</sup>: "Populism is an attitude or behaviour that is mainly political and focuses on misleading the target audience."*

In the question about university students and if they will have to be protected from this kind of politics, some participants think that university students should be protected from such policies. Furthermore, some others notice that measures could only create new problems. However, almost all consider that this achievement is very challenging.

*Participant 4<sup>th</sup>: "No one needs to be protected by such a policy. On the contrary, it can only create trouble."*

*Participant 5<sup>th</sup>: "Yes, it is necessary to be protected, although this is difficult as those around them can easily mislead young people."*

*Participant 7<sup>th</sup>: "Yes, they need to be protected, but it is not easy to achieve this."*

*Participant 8<sup>th</sup>: "They should be protected. Moreover, of course, it is possible."*

It is vital to refer to three examples mentioned by the university students, which are essential to understanding the practical part of this issue. First, populist movements with a robust nationalist or ideological agenda may seek to influence the content of educational materials. Second, populists may attempt to shape civic education to promote their version of citizenship and civic values. Third, they might impose restrictions on academic freedom.

In the end, and the last question about the most important values as a citizen, the core values encompass values of the democratic state, such as respect for human rights, equality, and justice. All the participants stated about respect, cooperation, kindness, and peace. 7 out of 10 participants claimed these values are linked to their European identity. However, 3 participants reacted negatively to the term European identity and the European Union's construction.

### **Populism and the educational challenge**

Another topic of the discussion was populism, if it influences what happens in schools, and how children and young people might experience it. Through the focus group, populism has a strong influence or at least is very often detected in the daily life of schools. When the discussion turned to the presentation of personal experiences, it was difficult for the participants, as half of them did not share anything with the others and us.

*Participant 2<sup>nd</sup>: "When children are divided into groups. Sometimes groups of people are created who conflict with their classmates because they differ racially, religiously, or even class-wise, creating this so-called "us-them" dichotomy as mentioned earlier in the "us-them" discussion."*

*Participant 4<sup>th</sup>: "Not me, personally. I have heard other people's experiences."*

*Participant 5<sup>th</sup>: "I do not recall any specific example."*

*Participant 7<sup>th</sup>: "If a teacher is a populist, this will affect daily school life because he will not be able to give children equal development opportunities. Consequently, he will sabotage them by creating insecurities, injustices, and instabilities in children's academic and personal efforts. I experienced it a lot when I was a student; teachers and kids treated me differently from other kids because I was a good student."*

We asked the teachers if they think that children should be protected from this kind of politics, as they mentioned that populism is a kind of politics. Concurrently, there was a discussion about how that is possible.

All participants thought that children should be protected from such policies. However, almost all consider achieving such a design difficult. For example, a safety net is impossible to implement.

*Participant 3<sup>rd</sup>: "... they need protection against anything resembling or involving manipulation."*

*Participant 4<sup>th</sup>: "The protection would be a good choice, but there needs to be complete protection, which is not accessible to achieve."*

*Participant 9<sup>th</sup>: "I believe children should be protected from this kind of "politics" because it undermines justice and democracy. In addition, children believe in and imitate negative role models, which poses severe risks for the formation of non-democratic citizens in the future of this society. Therefore, every teacher must fulfil the role assigned to them by the state."*

*Participant 10<sup>th</sup>: "Yes, it is necessary to protect them, although this is difficult as the others around the children can easily mislead them."*

Before the last question, we preferred asking participants about the populist politicians who challenge expertise and knowledge. For the participants, challenge science seems to be seen as a rather dangerous approach and, at the same time, linked to serving selfish interests - in this case, the interests of populists. The impact is also damaging both for education and for the education system.

*Participant 2<sup>nd</sup>: "... means that it will create scope for the decline of education. If politicians are not interested in public education, then how will the state be able to provide honest and virtuous citizens?"*

*Participant 3<sup>rd</sup>: "The challenge of science marks the anxiety of awakening. Science broadens horizons and perspectives, raises concerns, helps us to evolve, and, most importantly, not to compromise. For all the above, populists challenge it to keep the masses immersed in ignorance so they can more easily get their messages across unhindered."*

*Participant 7<sup>th</sup>: "This approach does nothing for education because it puts it in the opposite direction. Science should not be challenged by anything. Only by the scientists themselves in the context of progress and revision."*

*Participant 9<sup>th</sup>: "Such an approach is harmful because it shakes people's trust in science, and citizens receive misinformation on serious issues."*

In the end, the main discussion was on values, highlighting the common approaches of the participants. The core values encompass values of the democratic state, such as respect for human rights, equality, and justice.

8 out of 10 participants claimed these values are linked to their European identity. However, 2 participants reacted negatively to the term "European identity" and the European Union's construction.

*Participant 2<sup>nd</sup>: "Peace, equality, freedom, respect, solidarity, trust, honesty, etc. I would not say that these values are linked to my European identity as many of them are violated."*

*Participant 5<sup>th</sup>: "Respect, mutual help, understanding, love, cooperation. I believe they are linked to my European identity."*

*Participant 7<sup>th</sup>: "The most important values for me as a citizen are morality, justice, fairness, kindness, courtesy, respect, and empathy. These values are linked to my European identity because the creation of the E.U. came about through the need to integrate and defend these values in post-war society."*

*Participant 9<sup>th</sup>: "Democracy, freedom, peace, respect for human rights and justice. I see how these values are linked to my European identity, as they contribute to creating a united Europe where the future of its peoples is based on common values."*

## **Values and populism**

Having both teachers' and students' perceptions, we can make a comparative analysis. The analysis naturally concerns the common questions asked in the focus groups. This clarification is worth noting, as teachers were asked additional questions due to the nature of their profession since they are active teachers and teach in the classroom daily. As to whether the term populism is familiar to them, teachers answered that they are familiar with it and often hear about it in the

media. On the other hand, students were more hesitant as they could not define populism and were visibly doubtful about the content of the term.

As for the meaning of populism, both teachers and students placed populism in the context of politics, associating it with persons, parties, and specific ideological approaches. They speak of populism as if it only characterizes politicians. There seems to be an inextricable link between populism and politics today. Many present populism as a hollow tool for equality, while others present it as a tool for getting votes and serving interests.

Teachers who participated in our research believe that children need to be protected from populism and such approaches but stress that this is a difficult task. They are particularly concerned that populism is a danger to democracy and, consequently, populism seems to threaten future citizens, i.e., the current school pupils they teach. Students do not seem to be such strong advocates of protecting themselves from populism. However, those who answered in the affirmative converge with teachers that creating a safe environment away from populism may be utopian but also create individual problems.

As for the values they consider important as citizens, teachers and students are supported almost the same, moving to the same core and mentioning democratic values, respect for human rights, equality, and justice. Most participants in both focus groups argued that these values were linked to a European identity.

In conclusion, populism remains a complex and ever-evolving phenomenon that shapes politics. It mobilizes the masses with promises of change and restoring the people's voice. Its appeal lies in its ability to tap into the grievances and frustrations of marginalized segments of society, offering a seemingly straightforward solution to complex problems. Populism, of course, has its pitfalls. Its simplistic rhetoric can oversimplify issues, polarize societies, and undermine democracy. By painting a picture of "us versus them," populists often create a divisive atmosphere that impedes constructive discourse and collaboration.

The participants in both focus groups seem to know the concept of populism. However, some need help to decipher the term's content fully. The term was discussed by everyone as a political ideology, as a utilitarian approach, and as a characteristic of political figures. Most of the participants believe that school students, as well as University students, should be protected from populism. However, they point out that this is a demanding and challenging process as the most critical values that characterize them as citizens are democratic values, respect for others, and equality. Most people consider these values to exist in the European identity they have created.

Of course, what emerged from the present study is that populism is a phenomenon to be permanently investigated, and this effort was the first approach to the term and its outline in the Greek context, where the research on this issue is insufficient. Consequently, this is a starting point, making it clear that further investigation of this issue is necessary.

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

Through the narratives of the four countries involved in the study; Republic of North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Ireland, common threads and distinct patterns have emerged, adding to a broader understanding of populism's multifaceted nature.

In North Macedonia, the struggle against populism is shaped by a significant demand for populist politics rooted in a relatively short history of democratic governance, low media literacy, and prolonged economic, social, and political crises. In the RNM educators face the challenge of navigating this complex landscape, striving to instil critical thinking, democratic values, and media literacy in the face of populist influences. The United Kingdom's historical context, once synonymous with stability and democracy, continues to undergo a transformation as populist governance, immigration debates, and a decay of parliamentary democracy unfold. The struggle to reconcile populism with democracy intensifies as undemocratic attempts to control media and judiciary become prevalent. The UK research team suggest that educators need to be pivotal in defending democratic values and fostering an empowering citizenship education. In Greece, populism emerges as a mobilising force during economic hardships and political turmoil, capitalising on disenchantment. The interplay between populism, permacrisis, the welfare state, and Trumpism underscores intricate connections between politics, economics, and social dynamics. The case study serves as an initial exploration of populism in the Greek context, emphasising the necessity for further research. Ireland presents a multifaceted portrait of populism, challenging democratic values in various issues, including the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-vaccination sentiments and immigration. The emergence left and right-leaning populist parties may challenge conventional notions of populism, highlighting the multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of the phenomenon. Education emerges as a crucial battleground for addressing the challenges posed by populism, urging a more explicit incorporation of populist themes into the curriculum.

As Europe grapples with the rise of populism, the CitEdEV research highlights how educators must emerge as instrumental in shaping future narratives that uphold the resilience of democratic foundations. The collective findings underscore the need for continued scrutiny and understanding of populism's impact on education and society at large through EU policies and national policies. The educational landscape, marked by societal distrust, economic challenges, and the adaptability of populist narratives to diverse value systems, demands vigilant efforts by researchers, policy makers, and teachers to instil critical thinking, democratic values, and media literacy across Europe.

Informed and empowered citizens become the cornerstone of resilience against populist challenges, fostering a European landscape where democratic values endure amidst the ebb and flow of populist rhetoric. From this perspective we would make the following recommendations:

- **Critical Thinking Promotion:** Emphasize the promotion of critical thinking skills among students to enable them to analyse and understand populist narratives.



- **Historical Context Teaching:** Integrate teaching about the historical context of populism to provide a deeper understanding of its roots and evolution.
- **Global Perspectives Exploration:** Encourage exploration of global perspectives to broaden students' understanding of populist movements beyond national contexts.
- **Teacher Professional Development:** Provide professional development opportunities for teachers in civic education and media literacy to equip them with the tools to address populism in the classroom effectively. Address the lack of preparation and resources for teachers to tackle populist ideologies in the classroom by emphasizing specialized teacher training.
- **Curriculum Re-evaluation:** Call for a re-evaluation of the curriculum to effectively integrate discussions on populist ideologies, ensuring that it reflects the exposure of students to critical discussions of populist ideas through various channels.
- **Civil Society Involvement:** Emphasize the importance of local history, role models, and external organizations in providing support to address populism's impact on young people within schools and education.
- **Defending Democratic Norms:** Acknowledge the potential threat of populism to European values and democracy, emphasizing the importance of defending democratic norms, especially in the context of challenges to freedom of expression and the development of responsible citizenship among children and young people.





# Appendix 1

Here we present a **teacher training programme addressing populism** in education that integrates our report findings.

## Understanding Populism and Its Impact on European Values

- **Session 1: Introduction to Populism**
  - Definition and characteristics of populism.
  - Overview of the collaborative research project and its goals.
- **Session 2: Implications of Populism on Young People**
  - Explore how populist ideologies shape the political identities of young people.
  - Discussion on the impact of populism on perceptions of European values.

## Methodology and Research Findings

- **Session 3: Research Methodology**
  - Overview of the comprehensive research methodology employed in the collaborative project.
  - Discuss the importance of an interdisciplinary approach.
- **Session 4: Case Studies: North Macedonia, Ireland, UK, and Greece**
  - In-depth analysis of the case studies.
  - Examination of populist influences on education and societal values in national contexts.

## Pedagogical Strategies for Addressing Populism

- **Session 6: Critical Thinking Promotion**
  - Strategies to promote critical thinking skills in the classroom.
  - Discussion on the role of critical thinking in countering populist influences.
- **Session 7: Historical Context Teaching**
  - Integrating the historical context of populism into lesson plans.
  - Practical activities for teaching about the roots and evolution of populism.
- **Session 8: Global Perspectives Exploration**
  - Encouraging exploration of global perspectives on populism.
  - Strategies for broadening students' understanding beyond national contexts.

## Teacher Professional Development and Curriculum Re-evaluation

- **Session 9: Teacher Professional Development**
  - Examine opportunities for teachers in civic education and media literacy to address populism.
  - Preparation and resources for teachers to tackle populism.



- **Session 10: Curriculum Re-evaluation and Civil Society Involvement**
  - Call for a re-evaluation of the curriculum to integrate discussions on populist ideologies.
  - Emphasize the importance of local history, role models, and external organizations in supporting education against populism.

### **Defending Democratic Norms and Future Steps**

- **Session 11: Defending Democratic Norms**
  - Acknowledging the potential threat of populism to European values.
  - Strategies for defending democratic norms in the context of challenges to freedom of expression.
- **Session 12: Reflection and Action Planning**
  - Reflect on the training program.
  - Develop action plans for implementing strategies learned in the classroom.



## All publications arising from the Citizenship Education and European Values Project

- RESEARCH REPORT** Young People's Understanding of European Values: Enhancing abilities, supporting participation and voice  
ISBN 978-80-7603-412-9  
DOI 10.14712/9788076034129
- TEACHERS GUIDELINES** Citizenship in the Context of European Values: Recommendations for teaching in higher education  
ISBN 978-80-7603-414-3  
DOI 10.14712/9788076034143
- HANDBOOK** Citizenship Education in the Context of European Values: The CitEdEV Project  
ISBN 978-80-7603-415-0  
**DOI** 10.14712/9788076034150
- CASE STUDIES** Casebook  
ISBN 978-80-7603-465-5  
DOI 10.14712/9788076034648
- WORKING GROUP REPORT** Young Europeans as citizens online  
ISBN 978-80-7603-413-6  
DOI 10.14712/9788076034136
- WORKING GROUP REPORT** Populism and its impact on young people  
ISBN 978-80-7603-466-2  
DOI 10.14712/9788076034662
- WORKING GROUP REPORT** Young people on the margins  
ISBN 978-80-7603-467-9  
DOI 10.14712/9788076034679
- WORKING GROUP REPORT** Educational Policies and Social Responsibility in Education during the Covid-19 Crisis: Three case studies of Romania, Greece, and Ukraine  
ISBN 978-80-7603-468-6  
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- WORKING GROUP REPORT** Traces of tolerance in European history: A student-oriented and educational approach  
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