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The populist turn in EU politics and the intermediary role of civil society organisations

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ABSTRACT
The introduction to this special issue identifies an analytical and empirical gap in studies on European civil society organisations (CSOs) in the wake of the rise of populism. It explains how different contributions address these gaps. To this end, it first provides a definition of the main terms, including populism and anti-populism. It reconsiders assumptions regarding the role of CSOs and social movements as agents of European democratisation and legitimation. The main argument is that the populist turn has led to significant changes regarding the role of CSOs in the EU policy process. These changes are visible in three different but interrelated ways: the relations between European institutions and CSOs, the changes in CSOs goals and strategies, and the changes in the patterns of interaction between CSOs and populist groups. The final part of the introduction gives a brief overview of the contributions to this special issue and highlights how they provide further insights into the overall topic of relations between the EU and CSOs.

KEYWORDS
Civil society organisations; populism; European Union; social movements

1. Introduction

The recent successes of populist parties and movements have shaped the prospects and strategies of non-state actors interacting with EU institutions, particularly those that rely on the EU for funding, policy access and legitimacy. The involvement of, and support for, civil society organisations (CSOs) has long been central to EU institutional efforts to improve the democratic quality of the European integration process. Until a decade ago, CSOs were generally considered as essential channels for providing policy information, for improving participatory and deliberative mechanisms, for diffusing shared values and for improving the representation of minority groups (Cullen, 2009; Della Sala & Ruzza, 2007; Ruzza, 2007). As such, they were highly regarded and often coopted into multi-level governance structures. Often generously supported with EU funding, EU-level civil society umbrella networks and their national and regional members were tasked with reaching out across levels of governance to act as sources of policy integration and the dissemination of EU policy ideas (Sanchez Salgado, 2014).

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However, many CSOs, particularly those working on anti-discrimination, equality and human rights have now become targets of right-wing populist formations. At contest is their tolerant, inclusionary and cosmopolitan vision. Their funding is now sometimes framed as unjustified and even considered a gift to a corrupt self-serving elite. CSOs in Europe are also increasingly the target of regulatory pressures, and are experiencing restrictions on their activities as advocates and their ability to access funds, and in some contexts they are repressed through threats and intimidation (EUFRA, 2017). Many of these developments have been related to the populist turn, and especially negative public discourse and smear campaigns, as will be shown by several case studies in this special issue. Within this context, there is an increasing impression that narratives against human rights and CSOs are resonating with public opinion.

There is a wide literature on CSOs at the EU level, which is generally a subset of the literature on interest group politics (Della Sala & Ruzza, 2007; Jobert & Kohler-Koch, 2008; Johansson & Kalm, 2015; Sanchez Salgado & Demidov, 2018). However, the populist turn has rendered much of this literature obsolete. Assumptions made about the Europeanising impact of civil society networks and the wide acceptance of civil society groups by left- and right-wing politics at all levels of governance can no longer be taken for granted. In addition, in some contexts right-wing political parties and interest groups have developed their own set of CSOs. This is especially the case in Hungary, where conservative CSOs have been created and now apply for EU funds, pushing out the traditional or left-leaning CSOs. It is time to revise the long-held assumption of a 'global civil society' as a founding myth of the EU project (Manners, 2010). This is an idea that, along with several other policy ideals, such as subsidiarity or a 'social Europe', has defined previous failed attempts to constitutionalise the EU, and that now needs to be reassessed. This is the case also because CSOs have been under attack at nation-state level, particularly in countries with a strong populist representation in government advocating 'illiberal democracy' (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017).

There are several reasons why the established view of the relations between CSOs and EU institutions needs to be reassessed. In terms of the overall legitimacy of CSOs, the almost undisputed relevance of civil society at the EU level reached its peak around the time of the failed constitutional treaty, when civil society was seen as an ally in introducing elements of participatory and deliberative democracy into the EU. This period is long gone, and civil society representatives are aware that their position is now weaker. Some of the reasons for the decline of the relevance of CSOs at the EU level are not related to populism. For instance, the diffusion of forms of internet-based consultations has made Brussels-based CSOs less relevant, as the Commission and the Parliament can now consult widely across Member States without relying on top-level umbrella groups, which might appear detached from their national roots (Quittkat, 2011). However, beyond these practical reasons, the success of populists is further eroding the relevance of CSOs because these populists oppose all forms of political intermediation. In ideational terms, key aspects of the beliefs of CSOs are opposed by populist formations. These include the emphasis on human rights, anti-discrimination policy and democracy, reliance on intermediary institutions and on experts as guides in policy decisions. Furthermore, the populist philosophy is aided by powerful allies in the public sphere. In this respect, the supporting and influential role of tabloid media and other cultural outlets should be noted: in several Member States these espouse populist ideas, resulting in a de-legitimisation of the

role of CSOs in several contexts. This generally pertains to anti-discrimination advocacy associations, but also to some service delivery groups, such as those working on behalf of ethnic minorities, LGBT communities and some organisations working for the health and safety of women. Also significant is how populist governments shape policy, which has implications for EU institutions, particularly the Council, but also in different ways for the Parliament and the Commission as well.

This special issue focuses on EU-level civil society groups and their branches in Member States, and documents the epochal shift that has occurred in the last decade. The analysis scrutinises the impact of populist successes on CSOs' strategies, viability and access. The following research question is addressed: How has the recent rise of populism in Europe affected (or even shaped) European CSOs?

In this special issue, populism is understood both as an ideology with a thin conceptual core, including an antagonistic relation between the elite and the people, but also as a strategy and a political discourse used to a variable extent by a multiplicity of political formations (Della Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019; Freeden, 2017; Hanspeter & Pappas, 2015). The emphasis here is placed on right-wing populism. While there are relevant differences between populist political parties and groups (as explained later), it is possible to highlight some common traits. Right-wing populism typically includes a prominent anti-elitism, a nationalist rhetoric that values 'ordinary' people, and a frequent use of the categories of 'us' and 'them' (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Populists tend to criticise liberal states, including the role of intermediary bodies, such as CSOs, and tend to argue for models of direct democracy, such as referenda (Müller, 2016). The ideological package that populists propose is incompatible with the globalised cosmopolitan ethos of the EU and its supranational component. Reacting to these changes of political discourse and in some cases of illiberal policies, CSOs have engaged in a concerted opposition to populism that can be classified under the general umbrella of anti-populism. This special issue documents and analyses the dominant forms of anti-populism emerging from different types of CSOs.

With the term CSOs we refer more specifically to public interest groups, social movements and citizens' groups. In this field of inquiry, different terms are tied to specific areas of research that go hand in hand with specific approaches and normative assessments (Beyers et al., 2008). The use of different terms is thus more related to academic idiosyncrasies than to empirical reality and thus, in this special issue, we consider both research on public interest groups and institutionalised social movements organisations. CSOs are usually distinguished by a series of characteristics, including separation from political office, holding non-profit status, and working to bring about the implementation of their goals publicly and peacefully (Kohler-Koch, 2013). Among the different concepts used to refer to such groups, 'CSOs' has been qualified as the most normative (Beyers et al., 2008). This choice resonates with our specific interest in CSOs' potential to contribute to democratic legitimacy and social capital while acknowledging debates regarding their transparency and accountability. As several advocacy-oriented CSOs have roots in social movements, here and in some of the contributions to this special issue we will also utilise the literature on social movement research.

This introduction discusses first how the rise of European populism and the effects this has had on CSOs requires a re-thinking of current debates regarding CSOs and social movements research. The second part of this introduction presents the main findings of this special issue, as well as an overview of the main contributions.

2. The rise of populism and European CSOs: theory challenged

The rise of populism challenges many assumptions and conclusions of academic discussions on interest groups and social movement research. This section first discusses basic concepts, such as populism and anti-populism, and then explains why and how current academic debates should be reconsidered in light of the populist turn.

2.1. Different types of populism and anti-populism

As mentioned, anti-populism refers to a current of thought that specifically opposes key aspects of the populist worldview. We thus conceptualise anti-populism as an ideology that orients a set of mobilisation dynamics in specific contexts such as the EU level. It is then also a political strategy focused on opposing populist formations, and specifically their impact at the EU level. It also refers to a structured and principled opposition to populist movements and parties embedded in identifiable political formations. CSOs' moblisations replicate in the EU environment an anti-populist ethos that is gradually acquiring political relevance in Member States and elsewhere (Moffitt, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2018). While anti-populism 'still consists of an odd mix of ideological and strategic bedfellows pulled together in a temporary alliance of opposition to populism', it is nonetheless embedded in a range of political and social movements emerging in different contexts (Moffitt, 2018). As shown by the case studies discussed in this special issue, there is no doubt that EU CSOs engage in the struggle against populism with outstanding commitment and emotional intensity. However, the category of anti-populism is broader than the content selected by the CSOs we have analysed. For instance, there are conservative anti-populists who would not share the militant ethos of some CSOs, their emphasis on vulnerable minorities, or their reliance on intermediate bodies to improve the quality of democracy. However, they would oppose populists' rejection of expertise in policy-making and their undermining of institutional checks and balances (Nichols, 2017). This special issue documents the selection of anti-populist frames utilised by EU-level CSOs.

We can identify three types of right-wing political formations in the EU: the neoliberal right, the conservative right and the nationalist (or 'sovereignist') right. Each of these political formations adds specific contents to the populist package. The neoliberal right can occasionally idealise the market to the point of ignoring the need for the social protection of poor constituencies. Yet it displays populist traits that tend to consist of the stylistic elements of 'low politics', rather than the xenophobia or nationalism of other types of right-wing politics. It objects to the intermediary role of civil society, which it views as a form of reliance on state provisions rather than market forces. Its populism is well illustrated by analysts positing a stylistic contrast between high and low political styles. For instance, one can contrast a high political style as 'restrained, and proper, both in manners and institutional procedures' and a low political style as coarser (Ostiguy, 2009). However, this category uses populism mainly as a political strategy and is the most likely to shift between populist and non-populist politics for tactical reasons. One can think, for instance, of the populism of Berlusconi or even Orbán, as some MEPs have noted (Ruzza, 2010; S&D Group, 2015). A second type of populism is strongly nationalist and often nativist. It is exclusionary, which is a category that has been conceptualised by authors contrasting left- and right-wing populism in the context of the literature on

'varieties of populism' (Caiani & Graziano, 2019). It is embodied by formations that seek to redefine a European identity in terms of an exclusionary form of nationalism (Wodak, 2015). The third type is socially conservative populism. It is a populism that is strongly conservative on matters such as homosexuality, abortion, end-of-life issues and some women's rights. It is embodied by certain international organisations, such as the International Organisation for the Family. It has a small presence at the EU level, which is growing and is a specific target of organisations such as the European Women's Lobby (EWL) (Datta, 2018). In addition, it has a presence in key Member States, such as Italy and Poland. Its ideas are acquiring acceptance by some sovereignist organisations and constitute a direct threat to anti-discrimination and feminist groups (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018; Youngs, 2018).

In the absence of an agreed-upon definition of anti-populism, one can take the diverse ideological baggage of populism and reverse it to identify key forms of anti-populism. If populism might be defined by its anti-globalist stand, anti-populists might be expected to idealise globalisation. If populism is often xenophobic and nativist, anti-populists might be expected to be inclusionist. If populists are critical of the checks and balances of democracy, which are seen as empowering elites and distracting from the intrinsic unity of the foundational category of 'the people', anti-populists might be expected to defend these aspects of liberal democracy. If populists tend to justify and use theatrical political styles, anti-populists would be expected to emphasise policy-making based on rational policy analysis and relying on expertise and 'sober' or more conventional political repertoires. However, our analysis will show that anti-populism encompasses more than these ideas and practices, and is more varied. The CSOs analysed are all anti-populist as they oppose the anti-expertise, anti-globalist, anti-cosmopolitan perspectives of EU populism and its connections in an integrated ideological package as aspects of right-wing ideologies, which include the nativist, xenophobic values of the radical right. However, they also specialise within this broad opposition, with additional content that focuses on distinctive aspects of populism. Without a typology of populisms, we cannot understand the existing varieties of anti-populisms that CSOs express. Aware of this difference of foci among radical right-wing populists, CSOs tend to direct their gaze to those issues that are more relevant to them, even if their messages are often mixed. This is partly because they also need to establish coalitions, and, for instance, sign common documents, which focus on a variety of themes but often concentrate on issues such as threats to human rights that are common to many organisations, and more generally to the perception of a state of siege among all CSOs (Buyse, 2018).

If the populist turn has affected the outlook of CSOs, as argued in the literature, and has caused a shrinking of the space of civil society, it is necessary to identify the main dimensions of its impact (Ayvazyan, 2019). The literature on interest groups and on social movements can both be revisited in order to better contribute to this understanding.

2.2. Interest groups research and CSOs' democratic function

Interest groups research has mainly focused on the biases in the system of interest representation, the democratic function interest groups are supposed to perform in representative democracies, their internal dynamics (organisational aspects and logic of membership) and their external functions (mainly lobbying and advocacy) (Beyers et al.,

2008). While the populist turn may have affected each one of these topics, the dimension that seems to have been the most affected is CSOs' democratic function.

First, the populist view challenges the neo-pluralist view according to which interest groups can provide legitimacy to the policy process via their participation. This approach was for a long time adopted by EU institutions, particularly the Commission, and, as such, inspired much scholarly attention. The contribution of civil society to EU democracy has been approached from a governance approach and from a social sphere approach (Kohler-Koch, 2013). Regarding the governance approach, CSOs are considered to act as intermediaries, giving citizens a voice in the policy process and thereby contributing to input legitimacy. They are also considered to be able to bring interesting information and facts that can contribute to problem-solving and effective implementation, increasing output legitimacy and throughput (process) legitimacy. While most scholars tend to agree that CSOs contribute to increasing output and throughput legitimacy, CSOs' capacity to represent citizens and to promote citizens' participation has often been criticised. These criticisms are understandable (and can be useful) within the context of an optimistic discourse on the potential contribution of CSOs to democracy at the EU level employed by the Commission for legitimacy purposes. In the wake of the rise of populism, the context has radically changed. European institutions, including the Commission, may now be less willing to emphasise CSOs' potential contribution to democratic governance (Pejovic & Cossarini in this issue). In other words, many theoretical models employed to analyse CSOs' contribution to democracy, such as Habermas' conception of the public space, are based on high democratic standards and seem to be of little use in a context where populist groups prevail. In this new context, academic studies emphasising the lack of representativeness of EU-based CSOs, and criticising EU funding, contribute to supporting populist groups' views that define EU-based CSOs as elitist self-serving groups that connive with the European elites that fund them. This special issue attempts to grasp the complexity of the current situation and to give an updated (and context-appropriate) view of the role of CSOs in European democratic governance.

According to the social sphere approach, CSOs are expected to play a role by initiating broad debates, contestation and exchanges on the EU at the national level (Fossum & Trenz, 2006). The rise of populism in many EU Member States raises the question of whether CSOs are now more or less capable of contributing to the emergence of such a social sphere. On the one hand, in reaction to populist successes, CSOs are seeking to increase their popularity among the average citizen, and as such are increasing their efforts to engage citizens in public debates (Sanchez Salgado, this issue). On the other hand, an increasing polarisation between CSOs and populist groups may be an obstacle to creating a space of deliberative exchanges, as required in the ideal public sphere.

Regarding other relevant topics for the interest groups research agenda, it could be argued that the rise of populism has created a new cleavage beyond the classical divide between business interests and public interest groups. It remains unclear to what extent this new cleavage may have affected the balance of power among CSOs and business groups. It could be argued that the current balance of power has not really been affected since business organisations have a low profile in matters that are far from their key priorities, such as migration and human rights. However, a general

decline in the discursive relevance of CSOs at the EU level (Grote, 2019), as well as the opening of a new front (populism), may have diverted attention from business interests and economic topics, contributing to the deepening of the current imbalances in the system of interest representation.

2.3. Social movements research

Both populism and anti-populism are more than a party-political phenomenon. The populist vote and anti-populist reactions reflect a substantial social change – a change in political cultures, social relations and conceptions of friends and foes that have embraced the entire European Union, and beyond. CSOs are important actors in reflecting and even magnifying this change. Its magnitude can hardly be overestimated. It indicates a shift that has had significant repercussions throughout the European political space, and that has had a substantial impact on action repertoires, beliefs and policy blueprints. Populism's anti-system stance has justified an action repertoire that is often based on theatrical action forms and vibrant political protest, which echo the tactics and strategies of the social movements sector (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Increasingly, anti-populist protests are also emerging as prominent actors. They include campaigns such as the pro-EU protests in the UK or the Sardines mobilisations in Italy, where anti-populist concerns are expressly voiced.

Social movements scholars have highlighted different factors affecting the emergence, goals and strategies of social movements and CSOs. Among the most prominent theories are resource mobilisation theory (McCarthy & Mayer, 1977), political process theory (Meyer, 2004) and theories emphasising the role of values and framing processes (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Snow & Benford, 2000). Resource mobilisation theory conceives social movement as an industry and insists on the relevance of resources, publics, organisational constraints and political entrepreneurs. According to political process theory, the emergence, development, and disappearance of social movements depend on political opportunities. Last but not least, some authors emphasise the cognitive and ideational dimension, arguing that collective action frames are more relevant than political opportunities or resources. These rational, structural and organisational models have been challenged by the affective turn in social sciences (Goodwin et al., 2001). In the wake of this turn, many studies of social movements and collective action have recently integrated emotions into theoretical discussions and empirical analysis (Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005; Jasper, 2011).

Most of the existing research regarding policy process theory discusses how governmental decisions or public policies affect CSOs. There is much less research on how changes in politics (including the rise of populism and changes in public opinion) alter the political opportunities available for CSOs (but see Roggeband, 2018). How has a change in politics (the rise of populism) affected political opportunities for CSOs in the EU context? We expect that the rise of populism has significantly affected the most important political opportunities for CSOs: namely, access to policy-makers and funding. Answering this question constitutes an original contribution to the understanding of the interaction between the politics and policy dimension of the policy process approach. As the literature on social movement research points out, it is necessary to examine the political opportunities available to both challengers and opponents in the social

movement field as a complex set of interactions played out in public, media or policy arenas (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). These interactions do not lose relevance when movements become institutionalised and are embedded in public interest groups, as is the case of EU-level CSOs (Staggenborg, 2013). Their competition is in fact amplified and played out in new arenas, such as the domains analysed by the case studies in this special issue.

This special issue also examines how the effects of the populist turn depend on pre-existing organisational factors, including relevant factors such as resources and the logic of membership. The logic of membership requires that CSOs behave in ways that are in accordance with their members, supporters and/or constituency (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). We assume that the rise of populism has affected different types of organisations in diverse ways. As such, depending on their resources, ideologies and members, EU-based CSOs have adopted different strategies, which are discussed later in this introduction and in the contributions.

In the context of the shifts that have been observed since the populist turn, we also argue that framing processes, identity and the cognitive dimension have played a major role in the shaping of social movements and in CSOs' responses to the populist turn (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004). Since it is useful to examine the stances of CSOs in terms of their dynamic relation to populism and anti-populism, studies on movements and counter-movements, and on framing and counter-framing, seem to be particularly relevant to describe the changes in the strategies of CSOs within the framework of the populist turn (Ruzza; Cullen; Sanchez Salgado, this issue).

In the wake of the populist turn, special attention also needs to be given to the role of emotions (Sanchez Salgado, this issue). Populism is often considered to break the established rules of politics by appealing to emotions (Mudde, 2004). When referring to populism, the emotions that are most often highlighted are the so-called negative emotions, including fear, anger and anxiety (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). The predominant idea is that populist groups cultivate negative emotions, and that such emotions are used as illegitimate substitutes for arguments. Poor arguments can thus gain prevalence because of the emotionally-charged language that is used (Micheli, 2010). In sharp contrast, the study of the role of emotions in social movement research and collective action does not always adhere to this negative view of the role of emotions in politics (Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2011). Emotions can contribute to participation in collective action by facilitating solidarity. Moral shocks can also revive or redirect social movements and contribute to social change. So-called negative emotions, such as anger and pride, often lead to cognitive and emotional liberation, while fear and anxiety can move people to pay attention.

Studies on the role of emotions in collective action thus show that emotions can have a variety of effects and serve a variety of purposes – both desirable and undesirable (Sanchez Salgado, 2018). In addition to this, the dichotomy between rational and emotionally-charged deliberation is increasingly challenged. It is indeed increasingly acknowledged that the emotions are morally appropriate elements of political communication (Micheli, 2010; Bickford, 2011). It is likely that the rise of populism may have altered the way in which the emotions operate in collective action. Have social movements' emotion-based strategies had the same effects after the populist turn? Has the so-called wrong usage of emotions increased in the new context?

3. The rise of populism and the intermediary role of CSOs: a threat or a new political opportunity?

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue can be read as a diverse set of reactions to the populist challenge. Not all types of anti-populism are embedded in social movements and not all forms of anti-populism are equally able to mobilise. The CSOs discussed in this special issue have selected a limited number of ideological stances from the wider and often incoherent ideational content expressed by anti-populism.

3.1. The rise of populism and relations between political institutions and civil society actors

This special issue first illuminates relations between EU institutions and civil society actors by documenting the wide range of relations between institutional actors and civil society activists (Pejovic & Cossarini; Ahrens & Woodward, this issue). Like other political movements, the populist and anti-populist blocs engage in selecting where to invest resources among emerging political opportunities and which action forms appear more promising. For both populists and anti-populists the EU level enables the coordination of tactics and strategies, and the acquisition of resources, such as funds for research projects in the case of anti-populist associations, or a platform for strategic litigation.

CSOs engage in a common effort to forge alliances with other civil society groups and thereby identify a set of common frames. At the same time, each CSO also has distinctive political values that they need to affirm in the face of populism, and political strategies that can bring them the support of their political environment (in this case the EU institutions). CSOs then seek to identify the best ways to maximise institutional support and enlist EU institutions as allies. They need to identify a distinctive way to oppose the populist challenge in terms that are specifically suited to their standing in their political environment, and that links with aspects of their institutional environment. Thus, they pursue a dual strategy of partial convergence with the broader CSO community as well as strategic differentiation. This strategy can be characterised as a framing process in which CSOs spell out the meanings and boundaries of their opposition to populist forces and in this effort constitute an anti-populist bundle of ideational content, action repertoires and policy priorities.

CSOs not only articulate their approaches in terms of the content shared by other CSOs and those specific to different types of CSOs operating in different policy sectors, but also in terms of the extent of their critical stances towards EU institutions. In doing this, they are aided by the fact that there has been an abundance of speeches by EU leaders and institutional representatives condemning populism in recent years. It could thus be interpreted that the rise of populism has opened a window of opportunity for CSOs at the EU level. CSOs are increasingly perceived by the Commission as a key partner in fighting discrimination and defending human rights (Pejovic & Cossarini, this issue). However, this alliance between the CSOs and European institutions may be taking place mainly through informal channels of participation, to avoid the dynamics of polarisation and conflictualisation (Ahrens & Woodward, this issue).

Anti-populism has become a distinctive feature of the current project of European construction, as shown by the frequent references by institutional actors in both the

Commission and the Parliament (Ruzza, 2019). Thus, as a defining identity of the EU, it has become a political opportunity for CSOs. By espousing anti-populism they come to be seen as allies of the EU Commission, whose rejection of populism is frequent and even has moral connotations (Ruzza, 2019). However, it is an opportunity to be used sparingly as there are aspects of the European project that require a critical stand by CSOs, and too close a connection to EU institutions might erode their legitimacy, rather than increasing it. This ambiguity permeates several of the case studies in this issue. CSOs need to be critical of what they perceive as the technocratic and insufficiently redistributive nature of the EU, but they also need to fight right-wing populism. Thus, as Ruzza shows in this special issue, CSOs appear to be both critical of EU institutions and at the same time supportive of the process of European integration. In addition, many CSOs perceive and react against a sense of growing irrelevance in the context of EU institutions (Grote, 2019). This political opportunity is also limited by the fact that the Commission has been less willing to use CSOs as a legitimation tool following the populist turn and the growing animosity towards CSOs (Pejovic & Cossarini, this issue).

It is also important to analyse CSOs' response to populism along the national and European axis. For some CSOs, the populist turn may have contributed to a process of Europeanisation or internationalisation, while for many others it may have reinforced their national embeddedness. As a general rule, the dynamics of conflict and polarisation include a deepening of the divide between cosmopolitan CSOs committed to humanity and the international community as a body, as opposed to populists' commitment to the nation state. This special issue shows that, against expectations, the rise of populism has not necessarily contributed to the Europeanisation or internationalisation of CSOs. Many CSOs have indeed preferred to limit their response to populism exclusively to the national level, deepening pre-existing logics of what could be labelled as nationalisation (Giorgi, this issue).

3.2. The rise of populist framing and anti-populist counter-framings

This special issue shows that the pressures resulting from the populist turn differ greatly depending on the policy area and the institutional setting. This diversity of situations leads to a diversity of modes of response and adaptation to the populist challenge. The rise of populism has been differently defined and interpreted by different CSOs. CSOs have also adopted different strategies as a response/reaction to the rise of populism.

First, regarding framing, the contributions to this special issue show that a recurrent frame that connects the self-understanding of CSOs' role is an assertion of the benefits of involving civil society to fight populism, as clearly articulated in the frame analysis conducted by Ruzza. Another transversal frame is human rights, which is a topic emphasised by most CSOs discussed in this special issue. This is not only crucial for human rights groups and humanitarian CSOs (Sanchez Salgado, this issue) but also for LGBT organisations and gender organisations, and also as Giorgi notes, for religious groups. It is also generally useful for CSOs in their relations with the European Commission, as Pejovic and Cossarini argue in their analysis.

In relation to the typology of right-wing populism dominant at the EU level presented before, one notes that LGBT and gender equality organisations 'specialise' their role by opposing the variant of populism understood here as the conservative right. This illustrates the defining and identity-building role of anti-feminist campaigns for the conservative right

(Kovats & Pooim, 2015). This is evidenced in the Ahrens and Woodward paper. However, human rights and anti-racist groups tend to connect their political discourse to issues of inclusion and exclusion, and specifically oppose the xenophobic right (Ruzza; Sanchez Salgado, this issue). The same frame also applies to religious groups. This is because religious groups at the EU level strongly focus on Islamophobia, which is broadly connected to the migration issue and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Ruzza; Giorgi, this issue). In some cases, religious and ethnic identity overlap and thus raise issues of inclusion and belonging. Also, as Sanchez Salgado notes, human rights CSOs focusing on rights tend to focus on the defence of liberal democracy against populist attacks.

This special issue confirms that the rise of populism has led to dynamics of increasing conflictualisation between populist groups and CSOs. Both CSOs and populist groups have engaged in dynamics of vilification that have led to increasing polarisation (Cullen; Sanchez Salgado, this issue). The contributions to this special issue give multiple examples of this process of vilification. However, vilification is not the only dynamic at work, making the process of conflictualisation rather complex. Some populist groups have also engaged in the dynamics of frame co-optation. For example, right-wing groups have drawn on human rights frameworks to mobilise pro-life groups and traditional family values, which can undermine feminists' strategies (Cullen, this issue). When populist groups engage in the dynamics of frame-cooptation, CSOs also need to engage in counter-framing strategies, such as frame-saving and frame-debunking. Populist groups have also adopted a localist human rights framework to counter the universalistic human rights framing of human rights and humanitarian CSOs. In response to this, human rights and humanitarian CSOs have preferred a framing strategy based on ignoring populist groups, aimed at delegitimising right-wing populist counter-frames (Sanchez Salgado, this issue).

It is important to note that the opposition of populists to certain groups or values is not a sufficient condition for conflict. A few CSOs, instead of entering into a dynamics of conflict, have adapted to the new situation by engaging in low-profile dynamics that can be defined as accommodation. Ahrens & Woodward show that despite an increasingly threatening environment in the European Parliament, gender equality organisations have successfully managed to develop an adaptation strategy that involves using informal channels of participation (Ahrens & Woodward, this issue). Avoiding formal channels of participation seems to have contributed to avoiding dynamics of conflictualisation and polarisation in this institution. Muslim communities in Italy define themselves as non-confrontational, and their strategies respond to an aspiration to behave as moderate and responsible citizens (Giorgi, this issue). Muslim groups thus consider that there is an increasing politicisation around Islam-related issues in Italy, and that their role is to focus on local low-profile actions (such as campaigns against Islamophobia), interreligious dialogue and alliances with other religious communities. On the bases of the above considerations, relations between CSOs and populism can be framed through the typology illustrated in the Table 1.

4. Summary of the contributions

This special issue analyses the effects of the populist turn on the intermediary role of CSOs from two different perspectives. The first perspective focuses on the evolving relationships between European institutions and CSOs. Ahrens and Woodward analyse the extent to

Table 1. Responses to the populist challenge.

Strategy	Type	Examples
Accommodation	Low-profile	Informal channels of participation Alliances with local groups
Conflictualisation	High-profile	Counter-framing, including: polarisation/vilification, frame-debunking, frame-saving, and ignoring

which the increase in populism and extreme right-wing parties has modified the participation of equality CSOs in the European Parliament. Despite the strong adverse winds that are blowing, CSOs have maintained their presence, increasing their participation through informal channels.

Pejovic and Cossarini focus on the transformation in the relations between the Commission and CSOs by focusing on a specific case study – the refugee crisis and the relocation plan. They document how the Commission has reacted to the rise of extreme right-wing populism and hate speech in the context of unprecedented migratory pressures, including how this reaction has transformed the involvement of CSOs.

The second approach to the topic includes the analysis of changes in the advocacy strategies and goals of EU-based CSOs that have been particularly affected by the populist turn, including gender equality organisations (Cullen), anti-discrimination groups (Ruzza), religious groups (Giorgi) and human rights and humanitarian NGOs (Sanchez Salgado).

Cullen grounds her analysis in the broader and longer-term challenges facing gender equality EU CSOs, including the diminished relevance of gender equality at the EU level. Equality CSOs have evolved their response to anti-feminist right-wing populism as they work to re-politicise gender equality as an EU ideal and feminism as a project for the common good. The contribution by Giorgi focuses on religious organisations and documents how these religious groups have modified their understanding and their usages of Europe in the wake of the populist turn. The contribution by Sanchez Salgado utilises literature central to the field of the sociology of emotions to study how the populist turn has transformed EU-level CSOs' use of emotions in their advocacy strategies. Documenting this aspect is innovative and usefully complements the literature, which is still mainly structural and policy-oriented. The contribution by Ruzza compares the different political framings of a set of different types of CSOs. On the one hand, it shows that there is a search for a common ideational platform that would give a nascent anti-populist movement the cohesion and objectives it needs. It shows that, as explored in the paper by Pejovic and Cossarini, CSOs realise that they need to recover some of the legitimacy they feel they have lost, and to this effect they affirm their congruence with the values of the European project, and in particular with its stress on human rights and the value of civil society as a useful tool for participatory democracy as a distinctive European political identity. On the other hand, the contribution by Ruzza also shows how collaboration is objectively difficult as CSOs' targets are somewhat different when they address different types of populist movements and focus on different issues.

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