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**EUROPE'S  
DISCONTENT:**  
The Backlash of  
Populism

Hosted by MICHAEL SERAPIO

**NEWS  
IN  
REVIEW**

## IN THIS ISSUE

### Europe's Discontent: The Backlash of Populism (Duration 12:44)

The results of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the U.S. presidential election in 2016 may have caught many by surprise, but those who study political philosophy say it's all part of an anti-establishment backlash. It indicates a return to so-called "populism," where the people want more say in the direction of their country. And that could spell major changes for the leaders of many European nations in the near future.

#### News in Review Study Modules

The Brexit Referendum: Britain Versus the EU  
(Sep 2016)  
Greek Debt Crisis 2015 (Sep 2015)  
The Eurozone and the Economic Crisis (Nov 2011)  
Is the Recession Really Over? (Dec 2009)

#### Related CBC Programs

*Brexit Aftermath: Britain's Uncertain Future*  
*The Brexit Debate: A Nation Divided*  
*Margaret Macmillan on Brexit "Turning Point"*  
*Meltdown: The Secret History of the Global  
Financial Collapse (four-part series)*  
*Rex Murphy on Referendums*

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*News in Review – January 2017 – Teacher Resource Guide*  
**EUROPE'S DISCONTENT: The Backlash of Populism**

## VIDEO REVIEW

### Before Viewing

Populism is a political ideology that targets the interests of common or ordinary citizens who feel abandoned by those who govern. A populist politician or political party essentially capitalizes on an “us” (the common people) vs. “them” (the elite) sentiment and, regardless of the logic or practicality of their platform, manages to generate a degree of popular support — often enough support to take the reins of power. Populists will also use nationalism (extreme patriotism) to rally people behind their message. A populist approach is most commonly associated with the right-wing of the political spectrum but could be employed from the centre or the left as well.

1. Do you feel abandoned by the people who run your town, city, province or country? Do you feel a sense of anger toward the politicians who manage public affairs in Canada? Explain.

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2. What issues do you think are important to the common or ordinary citizen? Do you think some politicians are out of touch with these concerns? Explain.

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3. Are you aware of any issues that populist politicians are capitalizing on at the present time? If so, do they line up with the concerns that you mentioned?

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### Viewing

1. Provide two examples of global populism mentioned in the introduction to the documentary.

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2. What warning did U.S. President Barack Obama issue to European leaders on his final visit?

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3. a) Why was Front National leader Marine Le Pen encouraged by Donald Trump’s victory in the U.S.?

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b) Describe the political perspective and ideas of the Front National.

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c) How has Le Pen tried to make her party more mainstream? What perspectives has she sought to distance herself from in order to make her party more acceptable? Is the party transformation she is leading beginning to work?

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4. In which other European countries are there signs that populism is on the rise?

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5. What does Anne-Laure Augustin believe needs to be done to combat populism?

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6. While a Front National victory is not probable in France, why would it be important for traditional political parties to not take victory over Le Pen for granted?

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### After Viewing

French political scientist Dominique Moisi says, “There is a perfume of the 1930s which is clearly present, and not only in Europe, not only in the United States, but globally in the world. So I think what we are witnessing is a moment of truth for the entire Western world. We have to prove to the democratic world that populism is not irresistible.”

1. What do you think Moisi means by this statement? What does he think we need to be mindful of?

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2. What does he think we need to do to address populism?

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3. What actions are you prepared to take to combat the growth and spread of populism?

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## THE STORY

### Minds On

There was a time when it would have been unthinkable to suggest that a politician could get away with saying something like this:

// This is war. And it will not stop until we close our borders for Islam and de-Islamize our societies. No more terror. No more Islam! //



This is precisely what the leader of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, said after a truck driver plowed his rig into a crowd of people in the south of France. Heading into the spring 2017 election, Wilders and his party are leading in the polls by leaning heavily on an anti-immigration, anti-globalization platform.

1. Why do some politicians target minority groups to advance their position? Why do some people support these views?
2. How do you explain the popularity of populist politicians like Geert Wilders?

### Learning from history

Adolf Hitler once said, “How fortunate for governments that the people they administer don’t think.” Hitler was the prototypical populist politician who brought the world to war and oversaw the slaughter of millions of people, including a deliberate and systematic campaign to annihilate European Jews. He got into power by saying whatever people wanted to hear, feeding into their grievances and fanning the flames of fervent nationalism. He encouraged the German people to care only about the interests of the “motherland” and to repel — and, in the case of the Jews, destroy — what is considered “foreign.” It was one of the darkest

chapters in human history that found its origins in two movements: nationalism and populism.

### Brexit, Duterte, Trump, Five Star Movement

So why the history lesson? Well Europe, and perhaps the world, appears to be dangling on the precipice of a populism cliff. The populists are calling for a rejection of globalization and a movement toward isolation and national self-interest that is eerily reminiscent of the Hitler era. The initial indicators of this came in the second half of 2016.

First came the Brexit vote in Great Britain that saw 52 per cent of Britons vote to leave the European Union. The referendum result is seen by many to be a potential economic disaster for the island nation and, unless politicians can find a way to bypass the vote, British leaders will have to begin the Brexit by March 2017.

A week after Brexit came the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, a right-wing populist who assumed power on a promise to rid the nation of crime by any means necessary. Duterte has since led a ruthless campaign that has resulted in the deaths of 6,000 alleged drug dealers and the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of addicts.

Probably the most stunning populist development of 2016 came with the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Trump defied the pundits and pollsters and, riding a groundswell of support, managed to emerge as the anti-establishment candidate who would clean up the Washington swamp and “Make America Great Again.”

Finally, in late 2016, Italy’s Prime Minister Matteo Renzi put sweeping constitutional reforms to a national vote with the hope of creating a more stable political and governing environment. The populist Five Star Movement helped convince Italian voters to reject the progressivism of Renzi, claiming that the reforms would make the government in Rome too powerful.

All four electoral results confirmed the rising tide of global populism.

### Europe’s big year

The electoral results also confirmed a desire by increasing numbers of people for isolationism and nationalism. This flies in the face of the globalization movement that has been growing since the 1990s. Democratic nations have seen a steady increase in anti-immigration, anti-free trade and national sovereignty sentiments. As a result, populist groups from the right and left have been able to rail against the establishment who continue to espouse pro-globalization initiatives.

### France

This is why 2017 is seen as a critical year in determining whether nations will collapse into their own boundaries or continue to endorse multi-national, global forms of trade and governance. The continent of Europe is seen as the epicentre of this determination. In France, Marine Le Pen’s Front National is on the rise and stands to win enough support to potentially govern that nation — an unlikely prospect even a year ago. Le Pen has taken over the leadership of the party from her father, Jean-Marie, whose

anti-Semitic tirades made the Front National unelectable to many. However, Marine Le Pen has since distanced the party from her father’s polarizing positions and adopted more contemporary grievances to bolster support — namely an anti-immigration platform (that only grew in strength after a number of terrorist attacks in France) and an anti-European Union stance. According to Le Pen, French tax dollars keep bleeding out of the country to European Union partners in Eastern Europe. From her perspective, it is time for France to take care of itself — to close the borders to mostly Muslim immigrants and to keep the nation’s riches within its borders. France will be holding national elections in the spring of 2017.

### The Netherlands

The Netherlands will also go to the polls in the spring. Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom is expected to rely on a platform that is anti-establishment, anti-European Union and anti-immigration (with Muslim immigration being the main target) in an effort to win the most votes. The Freedom Party would need to form a coalition in order to govern, however, and all of the other parties have indicated they would not work with Geert Wilders to create a government. Wilders’ positions on Islam are seen as so inflammatory that no sensible politician wants to be associated with the populist politician.

### Germany

The other key battleground will be Germany, where incumbent Angela Merkel, perhaps the most progressive political leader in Europe, will have to fend off the rising Alternative for Germany, another populist party. The Alternative for Germany leadership is trying to stem the tide of immigration after Merkel allowed almost a million refugees into the nation last year. Alternative for Germany supporters are responding to their call by to close the borders and protect German sovereignty.

### Britain, Spain and Greece

While France, the Netherlands and Germany are not the only tests of populism, they are seen as the most powerful indicators of where global politics will head in 2017. Political analysts will also be keeping an eye on Great Britain as they either hold a second referendum on Brexit or begin the process of leaving the European Union. They will also be watching Spain and Greece, which have seen an upsurge in populist support in reaction to anti-austerity measures imposed on them by their national governments and the European Union.

### The Trump factor

While most observers claim the likelihood of a populist sweep through Europe is unlikely, one need look no further than the rise of Donald Trump to understand how unpredictable politics

has become. A Republican in name only, Trump emerged as a phenomenon unto himself, willing to defy his own party if necessary in order to deliver his message. He is a true anti-establishment, populist leader who has tapped into the grievances of enough voters to put him in the highest office in the U.S. Certainly Le Pen, Wilders and the leaders of the Alternative for Germany feel buoyed by his victory. Their hope is to ride the momentum of the Trump factor and lure the disenfranchised multitude to the ballot box. What this means for the democratic institutions of these nations remains to be seen. What is clear is that the populist surge is real and people need to start paying attention. Indeed, it might be time for people who really believe in policies like multiculturalism and globalization to fight for their merits instead of resting on years of international dominance.

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## To Consider

1. How is the current international political situation similar to the era of Adolf Hitler?
2. What warning signs of the rise of populism were apparent in 2016?
3. Why is 2017 seen as a watershed year in international politics?
4. What is the Trump factor?

## CHALLENGING THE CALL OF NATIONALISM

According to renowned Chicago journalist Sydney J. Harris, “The difference between patriotism and nationalism is that the patriot is proud of his country for what it does, and the nationalist is proud of his country no matter what it does; the first attitude creates a feeling of responsibility while the second a feeling of blind arrogance that leads to a war.” Unfortunately, populism feeds the hunger of fervent pride that is nationalism. Harris wasn’t the first to warn the world of the dangers of nationalism and he certainly will not be the last.

Read the following statements on nationalism and complete the activity that follows.

// Every miserable fool who has nothing at all of which he can be proud, adopts as a last resource pride in the nation to which he belongs; he is ready and happy to defend all its faults and follies tooth and nail, thus reimbursing himself for his own inferiority. //

– Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*

// So it is the human condition that to wish for the greatness of one’s fatherland is to wish evil to one’s neighbors. The citizen of the universe would be the man who wishes his country never to be either greater or smaller, richer or poorer. //

– Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*

// Somebody must trespass on the taboos of modern nationalism, in the interests of human reason. Business can’t. Diplomacy won’t. It has to be people like us. //

– Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*

// Nationalism is an infantile thing. It is the measles of [hu]mankind. //

– Albert Einstein

// National identity is the last bastion of the dispossessed. But the meaning of identity is now based on hatred, on hatred for those who are not the same. //

– Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*

// So much barbarism, however, still remains in the transactions of most civilized nations, that almost all independent countries choose to assert their nationality by having, to their inconvenience and that of their neighbors, a peculiar currency of their own. //

– John Stuart Mill

Source: [goodreads.com/quotes/tag/nationalism](http://goodreads.com/quotes/tag/nationalism)

### Task

1. Form a group of three and pick three quotes.
2. Each group member should pick one quote and perform the following tasks:
  - Write a brief biography of the person who said the quote
  - Provide a brief explanation of the quote
  - Explain how the quote is relevant in today’s world



### Try This!

Prepare a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation that shares your conclusions regarding the quotes with the class.