



STUDY PROGRAMME

1. POL
2. MATA-POL

ACADEMIC YEAR

2026-2027

SEMESTER

First

COURSE TITLE

Rise of Populism, Political Polarisation and Fragmentation across Europe

COURSE PROFESSOR

DE VRIES Catherine

COURSE ASSISTANT

VAN DE PLASSCHE Harm

NATURE OF COURSE (COMPULSORY, OPTIONAL)

1. Compulsory

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

English

ECTS CREDITS

1 ECTS

1. COURSE OBJECTIVE

The rise of populist parties in Europe has been one of the most striking political developments in recent decades. What explains their success, and what are the implications for the stability of European politics and societies more broadly? This course explores these questions by engaging with core debates on populism within the comparative European context. It is organized into three main blocks. The first introduces the concept of populism, assessing both its relevance and its limits, and discusses through the use of practical examples how populist parties differ from mainstream parties in their communication, rhetoric and behaviour. The second focuses on the causes for the increased success of populist parties, by focussing on economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, and geography as leading explanations of populist support. The third investigates the consequences of the rise of populism, focussing on government stability, political fragmentation and societal polarization. By engaging with cutting-edge research from different European countries, students will gain a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of populist success and critically assess the contested role of populism in the European Union.



2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

The following learning outcomes will be provided by this course

POL

- Students possess an in-depth knowledge of fundamental aspects of the EU political system (institutions, actors, policies etc.).
- Students recognize the normative assumptions and implications of theories of European integration.
- Students can recognize, contextualize, explain, and interpret political, societal and economic phenomena in European integration. They can assess events, governance problems and political crises.
- Students can transform a complex problem into a research question, mobilize theories, develop a research design, and conduct empirical work to provide solutions in an analytical and balanced way.
- Students can evolve in a multi-cultural context and of taking into account the variety of political systems, institutional logics and cultural backgrounds.

MATA

Knowledge

- The graduate demonstrates advanced and critical mastery of the principal theoretical approaches and analytical concepts in their disciplinary focus (International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, Political Science, Regional Studies) or interdisciplinary focus and can apply them to the analysis of transatlantic affairs.
- The graduate can identify, interpret and critically assess the current state of academic research on transatlantic affairs and can situate them within broader scholarly debates, in line with their (inter-) disciplinary focus.
- The graduate can contextualise and interpret contemporary transatlantic developments by integrating historical, political, legal and economic perspectives, and can meaningfully explain how past dynamics shape current policy choices, debates and institutional frameworks.
- The graduate can synthesise and integrate insights from multiple disciplines relevant to transatlantic affairs (e.g., International Relations, Political Science, Regional Studies or an interdisciplinary focus) and can adopt and compare both European and U.S. perspectives in analysing and evaluating transatlantic issues

Skills

- The graduate can analyse transatlantic affairs in a broad and multidisciplinary manner, assessing challenges in this domain with intellectual openness, sensitivity to diversity of perspectives, and the ability to understand and navigate complex and ambiguous situations.
- The graduate is able to critically reflect on a wide range of issues in transatlantic affairs, to develop well-informed and evidence-based points of view, and to communicate these effectively, both orally and in writing, when working independently or collaboratively.



3. COURSE CONTENTS

Part I: Introducing Populism

Lecture 1. The Concept of Populism

This session introduces the core debates around the definition of populism, exploring how scholars conceptualize it and how it relates to broader traditions in comparative politics. Students will engage with competing interpretations and consider the relationship between populism, technocracy, and traditional forms of party representation.

Lecture 2. Populism as Style and Strategy

Here we examine populism not only as an ideology but also as a political style and strategy. We will analyze how challenger parties use populist appeals to compete with established actors, and how media dynamics and political communication shape the populist message.

Part II: Causes of Populism

Lecture 3. Economic Insecurity

This lecture focuses on the link between economic change and populist success. We will look at how globalization, financial crises, and inequality create fertile ground for populist parties, and consider the mechanisms through which economic insecurity translates into political behavior.

Lecture 4. Cultural Anxiety

We turn to cultural explanations for populism, examining the role of identity, immigration, generational divides, and authoritarian values. Students will discuss whether cultural backlash offers a better explanation than economics, or whether the two drivers are intertwined.

Part III: Consequences of Populism

Lecture 5. Populist Parties in Government

This lecture assesses what happens when populists move from opposition into power. We analyze their impact on economic performance, bureaucratic quality, policymaking, and democratic governance, asking whether populist governments are distinct from other types of leadership.

Lecture 6. Normalization of Populist Parties

The final session explores the long-term consequences of populist and radical right success for political systems. We consider how mainstream parties adapt their positions, whether populist ideas become normalized, and the broader implications for democratic norms and stability.

4. TEACHING METHOD(S)

The course combines lectures with practice-oriented activities to support analytical skills, conceptual understanding and applied learning. Lectures will introduce and clarify key theories, debates, and empirical findings on populism. Case studies will be used to ground abstract concepts in concrete examples, encouraging students to apply comparative perspectives across different national contexts.

Active learning will be fostered through structured group work, in-class debates, and collaborative exercises. Students will work in teams to develop and present political risk assessments, applying theoretical and methodological insights to real-world scenarios. These activities are designed to strengthen analytical skills, critical thinking, and the ability to communicate complex ideas persuasively.

Overall, the course blends passive and active learning, combining the acquisition of foundational knowledge with opportunities for discussion, critical engagement, and applied problem-solving.



5. COURSE MATERIAL

Part 1: Introducing Populism

1. Concept of Populism:

- Mudde, Cas (2004) The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39: 541–563.
- Caramani, Daniele (2017) Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government. *American Political Science Review* 111 (1): 54-67.

2. Populism as a Style and Strategy

- De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara Hobolt (2020) Challenger Parties and Populism. *LSE Public Policy Review* 1(1): 1-8.
- Moffitt, Benjamin, and Simon Tormey (2014) Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies* 62(2): 381-397.

Part II: Causes of Populism

3. Economic insecurity

- Colantone, Italo, and Piero Stanig (2019) The Surge of Economic Nationalism in Western Europe. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33 (4): 128–51
- Funke, Manuel, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch (2016) Going to Extremes: Politics after Financial Crises, 1870–2014. *European Economic Review*, vol. 88: 227–60.

4. Cultural Anxiety

- Norris Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge University Press, Chapters 1- 2.
- Margalit, Yotam, Shir Raviv, and Omer Solodoch. (2025) The Cultural Origins of Populism. *The Journal of Politics* 87(2): 393-410.

Part III: Consequences of Populism

5. Populist parties in government

- Bellodi, Luca, Massimo Morelli and Matia Vannoni (2024) A Costly Commitment: Populism, Economic Performance, and the Quality of Bureaucracy. *American Journal of Political Science* 68: 193-209.
- Funke, Manuel, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch (2023) Populist leaders and the economy. *American Economic Review* 113(12): 3249-3288.

6. Normalization of populist parties

- Valentim, Vicente (2024) *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapters 1- 2.



- Abou-Chadi Tarik and Werner Krause (2020) "The Causal Effect of Radical Right Success on Mainstream Parties' Policy Positions: A Regression Discontinuity Approach. *British Journal of Political Science* 50(3):829-847.

6. EVALUATION

For this course no mark is attributed (and no exam is organised) but full attendance is compulsory and any absence has to be compensated by a paper assignment.

Plagiarism: Pursuant to Articles 39a and subsequent provisions of the College of Europe Study Regulations 2025–2026, plagiarism, self-plagiarism, collusion, and the falsification of data are expressly prohibited and shall be deemed to constitute academic misconduct. All written work submitted by a student shall be subject to assessment with regard not only to its originality but also to the scope and rigor of the research undertaken. Any instance of plagiarism, self-plagiarism, collusion, or falsification of data, as defined in the aforementioned Study Regulation, shall give rise to the imposition of penalties in accordance with Article 40 thereof.

Artificial Intelligence: Pursuant to Articles 38 and subsequent provisions of the College of Europe Study Regulations 2025–2026, the category of permitted generative AI (genAI) use for the present course is **restricted use**. Students may employ genAI tools exclusively at the foundational stages of the work process, such as brainstorming on structure or approach, screening of literature, or the organisation of data. The use of genAI for advanced stages of the work process, including the analysis or interpretation of data, the generation of arguments, the drafting or writing of text, or translation and rewriting of content, is strictly prohibited.

The non-generative use of AI tools, such as for spell-checking, reference style management, or information searches, is by default permitted for all course work and the Master's thesis.

Any use of genAI, even within the restricted category, must be transparently acknowledged in accordance with the departments referencing guidelines. Students bear full responsibility for the entirety of the content they submit, irrespective of the tools used, and must ensure compliance with College regulations on academic integrity, data protection, and intellectual property. Violations of the permitted scope of AI use, or failures to acknowledge such use, shall constitute academic misconduct and will be sanctioned in line with Articles 39a, 39b, and 40 of the Academic Regulations on plagiarism, falsification of data, and related infringements.