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'Actually Existing' Right-Wing Populism in Rural Europe: Insights from Eastern Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Ukraine.

Abstract

This study depicts various manifestations of what we call 'actually existing' right-wing populism. Based on empirical insights from eastern Germany, Spain, the UK and Ukraine, we explored how nationalist tendencies unfold in different contexts and what role agriculture and rural imageries play in this process. We analyse contextual factors (rural 'emptiness', socio-economic inequality, particularities of electoral systems, politics of Europeanization) and citizens' perceptions of social reality (selective memory, subjective experiences of democracy, national redefinition, politics of emotions). We conclude that resistance and alternatives to right-wing populism should be context-specific, grounded in the social fabric and culture of the locale.

Keywords: 'actually existing' right-wing populism, crisis of capitalism, representative democracy, rural emptiness, politics of emotions, European countryside

1. Introduction

Years of globalized capitalism, neoliberal restructuring and technocratic management have spawned an illiberal backlash manifesting itself in the rise of right-wing populist politics. Yet, this backlash has oftentimes come from the places 'where one should least expect it: the anger comes from rural idyll. Rural regions decide elections, surprise experts and change the course of entire nations[1]' (Müller 2017, 85). The European countryside is now often regarded as a

[1] Translated from German by the authors.

bastion of populist, socially conservative, religiously dogmatic, and nationalist sentiments and politics (Hajdu and Mamonova 2020). The outbreak of Covid-19 has further intensified the authoritarian and protectionist sentiments in society, allowing many European populists to cement themselves onto the political landscape (Tisdall 2020).

To date, rural support for right-wing populism has been the subject of several research endeavours. Among the most notable are the 'Forum on authoritarian populism and the rural world' by the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, and several region-focused initiatives, such as the *Sociologia Ruralis*' special issue on right-wing populism in Europe, the *Journal of Rural Studies*' special issue on authoritarian populism in North America, and forthcoming collection of articles on rural populism in *Latin American Perspectives*[2]. These research initiatives were aimed at understanding the rise of regressive, authoritarian politics in rural areas, as well as the existing forms of resistance and the alternatives being built against them. The present authors contributed to some of these endeavours with analytical articles on several European countries: (Franquesa [2019] on Spain; Mamonova [2019] on Russia; Mamonova and Franquesa [2020a], [2020b] on Europe; Brooks [2020] on the UK; Hajdu and Mamonova [2020] on Romania). The studies demonstrated that 'populism does not come with uniform, clearly defined characteristics; it takes different forms depending on nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture' (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020a, 8).

The current article aims to develop this argument further and examines the complexity of what we call 'actually existing'[3] right-wing populism. Instead of using the (often-contested)

[2] Besides that, the Annals of the American Association of Geographers' special issue on 'Environmental Governance in a Populist/Authoritarian Era' included several contributions that addressed the link between populism and the rural (McCarthy 2019).

[3] The term 'actually existing' emerged in the critical studies of capitalism and neoliberalism but became widely used in other fields to emphasise discrepancies between theoretical conceptualisations of a phenomenon and its veritable manifestations (Konings 2012; Brenner and Theodore 2002).

definition of right-wing populism as a starting point, we focus on the historically and culturally conditioned and context-specific manifestations of right-wing populism in rural Europe. This approach presents an opportunity for more effective analysis of the uneven and variegated realities of 'actually existing' right-wing populism, as it is guided by empirical manifestations of the phenomenon, not by its precise definition or conceptualisation. In other words, instead of moving analytically from the general and the ideal to the concrete – which would involve taking right-wing populism as a more or less coherent ideological position that takes hold of specific social realities – we approach it from the perspective of practice, focusing on how it emerges out of variegated forms of rural socio-economic livelihood change that are experienced from specific socially-situated positions in terms of class, gender and ethnicity.

Right-wing populism is analysed here from various angles: as a political movement, a discursive frame, and a mobilising strategy that 'depict politics as a struggle between "the people" and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged "Others", at home or abroad or both' (Scoones *et al*. 2018, 2). In Europe, the term right-wing populism is commonly used to describe groups, politicians and political parties that combine an 'ethnic and chauvinistic definition of the people', authoritarianism, and nativism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Their authoritarianism manifests itself in the promise of a return to traditional values, a desire for law and order, nostalgia for past glories and strong leadership. Their nativism takes the form of an exclusive and xenophobic nationalism, framed in opposition to an immigration that allegedly threatens to 'distort or spoil' existing cultural values and strip prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from native people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

We analyse right-wing politics and practices in four different contexts: eastern Germany, Spain, the UK and Ukraine. The first two countries were chosen to depict various nationalist tendencies triggered by what Dzenovska (2020) calls rural 'emptiness' – the real and imaginary

abandonment of rural areas due to the concentration of capital flows and statecraft in 'global cities'[4]. The latter two countries were selected to discuss the role of the European Union in nationalist mobilisation: anti-EU sentiments as drivers behind Brexit and pro-EU sentiments in post-Euromaidan Ukraine. The discussion, however, goes beyond reviewing the primary characteristics of the selected cases, and addresses other issues such as the system of representative democracy, redistributive land reforms, the impact of historical legacies and the emotional roots of right-wing political populism.

The four countries do not serve as traditional case studies, but rather as illustrations of revealing trends. The authors have profound expertise and conducted extensive field research in the selected countries (except eastern Germany, which was studied based on secondary materials). Besides that, the authors consulted with national experts from the selected countries to receive their feedback and insights on the topic (see the acknowledgements). The recent publications on right-wing populism in rural Europe were employed here as secondary data and support material.

The article is structured as follows. The next section discusses agrarian transformation and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism in rural Europe that created a fertile ground for regressive nationalist politics. The subsequent section presents the insights from the four countries under study. It is followed by a discussion on distinctive and common features of right-wing populism in the analysed contexts. The final section provides some concluding remarks.

[4] Dzenovska (2020) introduces the concept of 'emptiness' to study the abandonment of remote rural areas in post-socialist Eastern Europe, however, it may be applied to all areas that became abandoned by capital and the state. She understands the 'emptiness' as a discursive framework (used by its inhabitants to describe their lives), a complex historical formation (that has emerged in transition to capitalism) and an analytical lens (that captures the reconfiguration of relations between capital, the state, people, and place).

2. Agrarian Transformation and Multifaceted Crisis of Neoliberal Capitalism in Europe

Borras (2020) argues that the recurring emergence of populist ideas and politics in different historical conjunctures can be explained by the cyclical nature of crises of capitalism and by extension of the crises of political rule. Indeed, populists appear when the capitalist system 'cracks' and requires reconfiguration of the existing order. These 'cracks' are not isolated events; they are elements of the 'creeping crisis' of capitalism – a slow-burning crisis that evolves over long periods of time before it explodes (see Boin *et al*. [2020] on 'creeping crises').

The economic uncertainties and rising inequalities in the 1970s demonstrated the inability of the post-war Keynesian model of the welfare state to remedy structural injustices. Then, the rising 'New Right' politicians[5] offered radical solutions in the form of neoliberal capitalism, characterised by a free market economy, increased deregulation, privatisation, and a reduction in spending on the welfare state (Harvey 2005). Since then, rapid globalisation and prevalent doctrines of neoliberal development gained hegemonic status (Shucksmith and Brown 2016). However, if previously neoliberal capitalism was seen as a market-based solution to socio-economic problems, now it is often criticised for exacerbating inequalities, degrading nature, eroding social capital, and limiting the power of democracies (see Mamonova and Franquesa [2020a]).

Neoliberal capitalism has fundamentally transformed rural Europe – in terms of both agricultural production and rural lifestyle. The modernisation paradigm – that prevailed in EU rural development policies – suggested that industrialization and commercialization of agriculture would not only increase food security, but would also constitute a powerful engine

[5] Primarily, proponents of Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganism in the USA.

of overall economic development (see critique by Shucksmith and Brown [2016]). The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has 'modernised' many family farmers in Western Europe by transforming them into capitalistic entrepreneurs that are oriented towards markets and dependent on credit, industrial inputs and technologies (van der Ploeg 2009). Many farmers have found themselves trapped in a vicious circle of scale enlargement, technologically driven intensification and increasing dependency on food industries, banks and retail chains. They either have to expand by getting further involved in financial markets, or go out of business (van der Ploeg 2010).

In Eastern Europe, former collective farm structures were dismantled, and land was distributed to the rural population. Yet, individual commercial farming emerged on a limited scale; most of the land became accumulated by industrial agribusiness, often with oligarchic or international capital involved (Visser and Spoor 2011; Gonda 2019). Only a few countries – such as Romania and Poland – are still characterised by large numbers of small farms, yet processes of land concentration also take place there (Hajdu and Visser 2017). The accession of post-socialist countries to the EU brought a number of positive effects to the rural economy, such as subsidies for farmers and increased income for poor households. However, the CAP was unable to address the specificities of post-socialist agrarian structures, thus deepening inequities between small and large farms (Swain 2013).

In both Eastern and Western Europe, scholars observe instances of land grabbing, agricultural intensification, 'hollowing out' of medium-sized farmers, and the rise of 'food empires[6]' that

[6] 'Food empires' have emerged through takeovers, facilitated by the unlimited availability of credit and the global corporate and government 'marriage'. Among the most powerful food empires are Nestlé, Unilever and Monsanto that continue expanding. Besides that, there are relatively new empires such as Ahold, Parmalat and Vion, the recently created north-west European meat empire. For further discussion read van der Ploeg (2010).

exert a monopolistic power over the entire agri-food chain (Kay 2016; van der Ploeg *et al*. 2015).

Although agriculture remains one of the largest employers within the EU and it is strongly associated with the CAP's rural development framework, most rural areas experience a process of economic and cultural deagrarianisation. Industrial farms use economies of scale and labour-saving technologies, and, therefore, do not need a large workforce, except seasonal labourers. Meanwhile, family farms – the major agricultural employers – have been gradually disappearing. During the last decade, the number of full-time farmers across the EU fell by one third, representing five million jobs[7] (European Commission 2018). Today, only 4.3% of the EU's working-age population is employed in agriculture[8] (Eurostat 2020). This economic deagrarianisation entails a cultural deagrarianisation – *i.e.* the loss of interest in agriculture and rural lifestyle (Gallar and Vara 2010). The declining presence of agriculture in everyday life and disconnection with farmers have led to a decreased social understanding of farm processes and triggered various conflicts between farmers and society, especially in relation to climate change issues (Bunkus *et al*. 2020; van der Ploeg 2010, 2020a).

In addition to deagrarianisation, deindustrialisation has drastically transformed rural landscapes and their social make-up. The former industrial rural regions – those that were at the forefront of capitalist development at the beginning of the 20th century – became the 'losers' in the globalization process as factories and manufactures were shut down or moved to other countries (Hospers and Syssner 2018). Deindustrialisation reduced not only opportunities for employment but changed the nature of the work on offer. In result, many low-wage, low-skilled

[7] The decline was especially severe in Romania (983,000 jobs lost), Poland (616,000), Bulgaria (387,000) and Greece (189,000).

[8] This share is higher in post-socialist member states, where farming contributes up to 20% of total employment (Eurostat 2020).

workers – such as the Roma people in Eastern Europe[9] – became chronically unemployed and their housing and sanitary conditions deteriorated. This led to further stigmatisation and out-casting of the Roma, as discussed by Škobla and Filčák (2020) for the case of rural Slovakia.

Modernisation theory predicted that neoliberal capitalism would lead to the disappearance of socio-spatial polarisation (Williamson 1965). However, as Neil Smith (1990, 48) reminds us, 'the mobility of capital brings about the development of areas with a high rate of profit, and underdevelopment of those with a low rate of profit'. Although some areas and sectors benefited from the neoliberal turn in rural development (such as industrial agriculture and regional centres and peri-urban zones), others – mostly located in peripheral and economically weak rural regions – have lost (Shucksmith and Brown 2016). There is intense drain on the social, cultural and economic capitals in remote rural areas, creating the so-called spaces of 'emptiness' (see Dzenovska [2020]). Up to 60% of rural areas in the EU experience depopulation, which is especially severe in Eastern and Central Europe, where more than 80% of rural regions have shrunk since 2001 (ESPON 2020). Social welfare cuts and rural exodus cause deterioration of infrastructure and facilities (roads, schools and hospitals) that are critically important for the survival and wellbeing of rural communities. As young and active people leave economically weak rural areas, those who are 'left behind' experience declining living standards, the loss of social status, and high dependence on state transfers (Dzenovska 2020).

The function of a village, where agriculture has been traditionally organized and embedded into the social fabric, has been disappearing in Europe (Bunkus *et al*. 2020). The switch from productive land use to consumption-based demands has generated a consumerist ideology, which is especially pronounced in rural areas of Western and Northern Europe (Marsden 1999).

[9] The communist governments were aimed at achieving full employment for all citizens, including the Roma population, who were commonly employed as unskilled industrial workers (Škobla and Filčák 2020).

In consumerist societies, economic capital is important for maintaining social identities, while personal success or failure are measured in employment and welfare benefits. When people are unable to live up to salient social identities and their constitutive values, they experience low self-esteem, shame and insecurity (Salmela and von Scheve 2017). Scholars observed increasing socio-economic tensions (Woods and McDonagh 2011) declining life-satisfaction (Bunkus *et al*. 2020), and widespread feelings of a loss of dignity (Franquesa 2018) in rural Europe during the recent years.

The rising discontent and resentment in rural society have triggered what Woods (2005) called 'rural reawakening' – an increase in rural mobilisation and activism in response to neoliberal policy reforms, globalisation, and extensive social change in the European countryside. However, rural protest groups remain mostly fragmented and only informally linked, which limits their ability to challenge the status quo (Woods 2015; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020a). Meanwhile, large-scale agribusiness and multinational corporations successfully lobby European governments. As a result, 'corporate policy is becoming more fully engaged in public policy to further its own interests, thus raising questions about accountability' (Lang and Heasman 2004, 127).

The creeping crisis of neoliberal capitalism entails a crisis in the system of representative democracy (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020a). Federal, supranational and international governance structures have become increasingly complex and non-transparent, while the dominant political parties often function like cartels – *i.e.* they focus on preventing their competitors from coming to power rather than solving actual problems (see Katz and Mair [2009] on 'cartel parties'). Consequently, many people have come to believe that their governments represent the interests of large corporations, political decisions are agreed on in back rooms, and the interests of 'the men and women on the street' are overlooked (Vorländer *et al*. 2018, 183).

Political alienation is especially profound in the European countryside. Rural and farming issues are usually ignored and often misunderstood by mainstream political parties (Cramer 2016). The disconnection between politicians and rural areas is the result of the urban bias in politics, when urban-based politicians are 'unlikely ever to understand the true needs of rural people' (Cramer 2016, 17), and the parties' strategic focus on urban constituencies due to the declining numbers of rural voters and entrenched stereotypes about villagers' political apathy (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020a). Besides that, since the 2008 economic crisis, many rural municipalities have experienced a decrease in economic and political autonomy and a reduction in the number of units of local self-government (Ladner *et al.* 2015). The political alienation and inability to influence local decision-making have further intensified rural discontent and fuelled public resentment against the 'market-compliant democracy' (Vorländer *et al*. 2018).

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated critical frailties, inequalities and the unsustainability of late capitalist economies. The biomedical crisis has quickly developed into a multi-facetted politico-economic crisis in, and of, the food-system (van der Ploeg 2020b). The 'badly balanced world market and the high degree of financialization of both primary agricultural production and food chains' have resulted in a situation where 'capital [was] acting as a de-activating instead of a productive force' (van der Ploeg 2020b, 2). The paralyzing force of capital was especially visible in the beginning of the crisis, when supermarket shelves were empty, while farmers had to destroy tonnes of fresh food that they could no longer sell. The EU governments' attempts to guarantee food supply largely resulted in supporting global agribusiness and supermarket chains, while local farmers' markets were forced to close (Foote 2020). Lockdowns, movement restrictions, and reduced demand have resulted in widespread job losses and rising poverty across the EU. The pandemic has also highlighted structural inequalities and precarity generated by neoliberal regimes of labour market regulation. The agricultural workers – both seasonal (migrant) and processing factories' workers – occupied

positions that made them extremely vulnerable to contracting the disease. The largest outbreaks of Covid-19 were reported in industrial meat processing factories, where social distancing is hard to enforce, and where low pay, illegal wage deductions and job insecurity forced many employees to go to work sick. Furthermore, the pandemic laid bare the persistent inequalities within the EU: health and safety of seasonal farmworkers, primarily from Eastern Europe, became largely overlooked in order to save the harvest in Western Europe. The governments' handling of the pandemic provoked discontent among certain social groups, especially those who are inclined to support right-wing ideas and policies (Youngs 2020).

3. Populism in Rural Europe

Right-wing populist parties and nationalist movements are using societal resentment to gain support and spread their ideas in the countryside. They discursively portray themselves as acting on behalf of 'the people' against urban elites, the political establishment at home and 'unelected bureaucrats in Brussels'. They wholeheartedly criticise the neoliberal approach to the economy and the organisation of society, yet they are far from providing alternative solutions. Instead, as Mamonova and Franquesa (2020a) have demonstrated, European populists aim to 'defend and maintain capitalism "in the name of the people"':

> [W]hile right-wing populism is anti-liberal in terms of identity politics (*e.g.*, multiculturalism, abortion rights, minority rights, religious freedom), it is very liberal in its economic policies. Populists become the protectors of a national identity with which the masses can identify, while simultaneously negotiating better global terms for the elite. They sell what [Jean-François] Bayart calls 'liberalism for the rich and nationalism for the poor' (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020a, 7)

These characteristics are exceptionally useful to make sense of the populist rise in Europe and globally. Yet, as Scoones *et al*. (2018, 2) remind us, right-wing populist features 'are not evident everywhere, nor are they necessarily evident in their entirety anywhere'. We thus argue for the need to study 'actually existing' right-wing populism through specific case studies. Below, we contribute to this task by analysing the unfolding of regressive nativist politics in four different national settings, with a special focus on their rural dimensions.

3.1. The 'Dying' Villages of Eastern Germany as Home to Right-Wing Movements

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the river Elbe continues to mark the cultural, political and economic divide between Eastern and Western Europe. This divide became especially profound during the 2017 federal election, when the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland became the third-largest party in the Bundestag due to its success in the East, particularly in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony and Thuringia (Oltermann 2017). The underpopulated and economically disadvantaged villages of Saxony became the 'synonymous for a xenophobic, anti-refugee "dark" side of Germany' – the image which now extends to the whole of eastern Germany (Vorländer *et al*. 2018, 118).

Despite German reunification in 1990 and the development programme 'Aufbau-Ost', economic performance and living standards in the former communist eastern states remain lower than in the old federal states. Gross wages of eastern Germans are currently at 85% of the western German level, and unemployment is 20% higher in the East (BMWi 2019). The eastern German economy is still organised on a small scale, there are no headquarters of international corporations, and the region remains largely rural. The recent report on the 'status of German unity' revealed that 57% of eastern Germans feel that they are second-class citizens, and only 38% feel that reunification was successful (BMWi 2019).

The feelings of being ‘disrespected’ and ‘disadvantaged’ in relation to their western German compatriots are especially profound in rural areas of eastern Germany (Liebmann 2010). The transition from communism to capitalism resulted in rapid structural changes in agriculture and the rural economy. The former collective farm enterprises – which were the socio-economic backbones of rural regions – were dissolved and transformed into private agricultural firms. Such reform was aimed to mitigate the differences between western and eastern German agriculture and to create family farms. However, just a few families were able to reclaim their land and organise private farms. In most cases, collective lands were accumulated by former farm managers and, later, by non-local, non-agricultural investors. Bunkus and Theesfeld (2018) characterise this process as an instance of land grabbing with negative impacts on local rural communities.

Indeed, the majority (76%) of land investors come from West Germany or abroad and show little interest in investing in the economic and social development of the region (Tietz 2017). Land speculations drove land prices up, making access to farmland for new entrants limited and expensive (Bunkus and Theesfeld 2018). Young, well-educated, often female villagers left economically weak rural areas. Those ‘left behind’ experienced unemployment, a loss of social status, and ‘the feeling of the devaluation of personal achievements in one’s life during GDR times’ (Vorländer *et al*. 2018, 177). Local governments are often unable to provide public services and infrastructure maintenance in depopulated rural areas because the allocation of tax revenues to German municipalities depends – among others – on population figures. In result, many eastern German villages became zones of economic and social vacuum (Chatalova and Wolz 2019).

This socio-economic vacuum became the breeding ground for right-wing populists and radical right groups. These groups exploit rural resentments against the ‘domination’ and ‘arrogant presence’ of ‘import elites from the West’ and more recent threats such as the refugee and

Eurozone crises (Vorländer *et al*. 2018). Contrary to common assumptions, the fear of Islamisation is not a major motivation for those taking part in far-right mobilisation in eastern Germany. Only 15.4% of participants in the Dresden demonstrations organised by PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident) showed resentment towards Muslims. The majority joined the demonstrations not because of but despite the anti-Islam agenda of the movement.

In their analysis of political views of Dresden protesters, Vorländer *et al*. (2018) reviewed that eastern Germans are more tolerant towards everyday expressions of xenophobic and nationalistic attitudes, than the western German population. This is the result of the patriotic education in the GDR and the contemporary struggles with national redefinition due to transition from communism to capitalism. Furthermore, eastern Germans are more favourable to right-wing dictatorship than their western counterparts. Nearly 14% of respondents believed that under certain circumstances a dictatorship is a better form of government, and 12.8% wish for a strong leader for the benefit of all (4.8% and 9%, respectively, expressed the same views in West Germany).

Economic uncertainty and recession during the post-communist democratisation process contributed to the fact that, although democracy is viewed as a desired form of governance, its implementation is experienced by many as 'foreign', adopted from the West (Vorländer *et al.* 2018). Population decline in eastern rural regions entailed the centralisation of some functions of local self-government, which limits public involvement in decision-making (Chatalova and Wolz 2019). Besides that, underpopulated rural councils are lacking enough candidates to fill seats, and right-wing populists are often elected as the only persons keen on the job (Nasr 2019).

The 'dying' villages of eastern Germany became attractive for Völkische Siedler (ethnic/folkish settlers). The settlers buy abandoned rural houses, set up organic farms, and get actively involved in revitalising village social, cultural and economic life. The self-definition of this

group as settlers points to their colonizing impetus (Röpke and Speit 2019). They largely follow the right-wing back-to-the-land ideas of Artamans – the former Nazi agrarian movement dedicated to the Blood and Soil-inspired ruralism. They aim to realise the dream of German 'Volksgemeinschaft' and to create 'racially pure', self-sufficient peasant communities. The settlers present themselves as helpful neighbours, hard-working craftspeople and committed parents, and, therefore, are popular in villages. Rural resistance to right-wing incomers is uncommon. Social proximity in villages limits interpersonal confrontation, and those who stand up for democratic values are often labelled as 'troublemakers' and 'Nestbeschmutzer[10]' (Hellwig 2017). This allows these settlers to expand and spread their ethno-racial ideology almost unimpeded.

3.2. *Vacía* or *Vaciada*: Rural Spain and the Populist Question

Like in eastern Germany, depopulation is an acute problem in Spain's rural areas and plays an important role in right-wing populist mobilisation. Yet, in contrast to the German case, in Spain rural 'emptiness' triggers both right-wing and left-wing populist rhetoric and politics.

Up until very recently, Spain was heralded as the exception to the rise of right-wing populism in Europe (Franquesa 2019). This all changed in the 2018-19 electoral cycle. In December 2018, Vox (Latin for 'voice') obtained 10% of the vote in the Andalusian election, thus becoming the first far-right populist party to enter a Spanish regional parliament since the reestablishment of democracy in the late 1970s. This success was replicated in the national election held in April 2019. After this election, the unwillingness of the most voted candidate – Pedro Sánchez (the leader of centre-left PSOE) - to form a coalition with left-wing populist party Podemos, led to

[10] German expression, which means 'those who foul their own nest' and used to describe a person who criticizes or abuses their own country or family.

an electoral repetition in November 2019, when Vox obtained 15% of the vote and became the third party in the parliament.

Vox was formed in 2014 by disgruntled cadres of then ruling conservative party Partido Popular (PP), who wanted to move away from what they saw as the party's drift to moderate positions. From its creation, Vox's political discourse relied on extreme Spanish nationalism, anti-immigration and social conservatism, together with a tacit endorsement of neoliberal economic policy. However, up until 2018 the party harvested meagre electoral results. The recent rise of Vox is partly linked to conjunctural circumstances, but it also signals the success of the emotional conception of politics of Santiago Abascal – Vox's leader. As he argued in an interview: 'politics is not just urban planning, school schedules, street lighting [rather, it is about connecting] with feelings and convictions: honour, patriotism and things like that' (Sánchez Dragó 2019, 43). This appeal stems from Vox's call to 'Make Spain Great Again' – a project that is understood as a second Reconquista against separatists, communists, Islamists, foreigners and progressives.

Rural imagery plays a key role in Vox's politics of emotion. In a 2016 promotional video entitled 'A new beginning', Abascal was filmed wandering through rural landscapes.[11] The video visualises some ideas of the early decades of Franco's dictatorship: an organic view of the nation intertwining nation and nature where rural Spain comes to stand as the not-yet-corrupted origin of the Spanish nation, a pure and immortal Spain threatened by immoral, centrifugal forces (Del Arco 2005). Another example of using rural imagery is a tweet that Vox issued during the 2020 Covid-19 outbreak, which contrasted several well-known left-leaning movie stars (such as Pedro Almodóvar and Javier Bardem) to a tractor in a field, with the

[11] This video can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaSIX4-RPAI

following words super-impressed: 'Maybe now Spaniards realize that we can live without puppeteers but not without our farmers'.

Vox ardently uses for its own interests the image of the so-called *España vacía* or 'empty Spain' (Del Molino 2016). Their 2016 promotional video depicts mountains, forests, cultivated fields and a group of horses, but no people, which is a metaphor for the acute depopulation affecting the Spanish countryside. Today, 70% of Spain's territory hosts only 10% of its total population (Recaño 2017). Yet, depopulated Spain holds a notable electoral sway due to existing electoral regulations (Jones 2019). Of Spain's 52 provinces, the 26 less populated ones (mostly in central, inland regions) contain 20% of the country's population but yield 29% of MPs in parliament (Gil Grande 2019).

Such an over-representation, combined with the little attention that Podemos paid to it, helps explain Vox's electoral focus on the 'empty' Spain. The party articulated a discourse in defence of 'the rural world and its traditions', which put emphasis on practices – such as hunting and bullfighting – that were allegedly under threat due to the attacks of urban progressives, animal-rights activists, separatists and 'radical environmentalists' (Fernández 2019a). Armed with this discourse, Vox initiated an organizational campaign aimed to tap into rural feelings of abandonment and to gain presence in the rural world. It reached out to well-established rural conservative organizations (among others, the agrarian union ASAJA and the Hunting Federation) and mobilized key personal connections (*e.g.* the president of the Hunting Federation successfully ran as an MP candidate for Vox in Guadalajara province).

Through these organizations Vox tried to infiltrate and hold sway of Alianza Rural (Rural Alliance) – a non-partisan umbrella platform that includes more than a hundred organizations aimed at the environment protection, sustainability and biodiversity. In March 2019, Alianza Rural organised a large demonstration to demand governmental help for depopulated rural areas. Vox tried to turn this grassroots demonstration into a massive anti-government protest.

Vox's intrusion was neutralized, and the demonstration was supported by all major parties (Fernández 2019b). A few weeks later, a larger demonstration under the slogan 'The Revolt of the Emptied Spain' was organized by a different array of organizations, with a stronger presence of progressive groups. Framed as a rallying cry against depopulation, the motto's use of the adjective 'emptied' (*vaciada*) instead of 'empty' signals a rather successful effort to articulate a different kind of response and multi-class alliance: Spain's countryside is not empty, rather, it became emptied after years of governmental neglect and cultural mainstream stigmatization. The demonstrators argued that rural Spain did not need more hunting and more traditions, but better welfare services and realistic economic development plans. This reformulation counteracted Vox's emotional politics and made room for a centre-left articulation of populism in rural Spain.

Vox has gained notable popularity in the Spanish countryside - especially in Castilian-speaking regions, where right-wing populism tends to be strongest (Vampa 2020). This shows that the party has been able to capitalize on the feelings of abandonment and frustration produced by decades of depopulation, impoverishment and agricultural decline. Yet rural, emptied Spain is not Vox's stronghold: the monthly opinion polls published by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas suggest no significant correlation between support for Vox and the size of respondent's settlement[12] (CIS 2020). Vox is most successful in two types of areas: upper and upper-middle class urban neighbourhoods, especially around Madrid, and historically right-leaning, poor rural areas with a strong presence of agri-business and agrarian labourers of migrant origin, such as in the peninsular Southeast (Reche 2019). Meanwhile, the party obtained rather modest results in rural areas dominated by family farming (Fernández 2019b), especially in non-Castilian-speaking rural Spain, where the party's extreme nationalism is the prime

[12] Yet there is a higher-than-average support among those who work in the agrarian sector.

reason for its marginal electoral results in those regions (Balearic Islands, Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia and Navarre, with the relative exception of the Valencian Country).

Although Vox has made important inroads both in urban and rural areas of central and southern Spain, it has largely failed to conquer *emptied* Spain. This failure is illustrated by the success of Teruel Existe (TE) in the November 2019 election in the small province of Teruel (Aragon region in eastern Spain). TE is a citizen platform created in 1999 to defend the interests of rural, depopulated Teruel. After playing a key role in orchestrating the shift from *empty* to *emptied* Spain, this platform decided to run in the November general election. TE won the election in Teruel with 26% of the vote, obtaining one MP. This victory shows that although authoritarian populist discourses have certainly gained strength, they have not become hegemonic in rural Spain, and that if progressive forces are able to create alternative left-leaning populist projects they are likely to succeed (Cortes-Vazquez 2020).

3.3. Brexit and Politics of the Rural

Although Brexit is not universally acknowledged to be a right-wing populist moment, public debate around it has been cast in recognisably populist terms that pit those representing 'the will of the people' against an out of touch 'metropolitan elite' (Glaser 2016). Brexit was initially interpreted as a working-class revolt against the ravages of neoliberal globalisation and post-industrial decline (Goodwin and Heath 2016). However, evidence shows that support for it came from a cross-class constituency of predominantly middle-aged and older white citizens (Dorling 2016). Slogans like 'take back control' and 'I want my country back' conveyed a desire of this constituency to return to an idealised past shaped by nostalgia for imperial power abroad and racial and cultural homogeneity at home (Virdee and McGeever 2018).

As in the case of Spain, images of rurality played an important role in the Brexit mobilisation, but in a way that cannot be reduced to geographical distribution of votes (Brooks 2020). Brexit support was significant among the English, and especially those identifying as English rather than British (Virdee and McGeever 2018). While the populations of England and Wales[13] voted for Brexit; Scotland and Northern Ireland delivered pro-remain majorities (Electoral Commission 2016). In a UK-wide referendum, however, these variations were ironed out by the votes of the 84% of the population residing in England. This reflected a characteristic of English nationalism, which, in contrast to other UK nationalisms has historically aligned with Euroscepticism. This antipathy towards the EU merges with a nostalgia for Empire that conflates British with English identity: an identity anchored in rural landscapes as 'the ethnic homelands of the English' (Reed 2016, 228). The Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP) found a way to mobilise this Great Britain/Little England identity and, thereby, transformed the national political landscape.

The UK has a two party 'first-past-the-post'[14] system that has long been believed to mitigate against the rise of political extremes. Over the last century, power has alternated between the centre-right Conservative (Tory) Party and centre-left Labour Party within a relatively stable system. Divisions regarding EU membership surfaced, at times, within both parties, but these remained, for the most part, intra-party conflicts. This changed dramatically when UKIP transformed itself from a single-issue party formed to oppose the Maastricht treaty into a political force able to mobilise a broader set of 'feelings and experiences' of 'particular groups,

[13] The referendum result in Wales was tipped towards support for Brexit by the votes of resident English retirees (Dorling 2016).

[14] 'First-past-the-post' is the form of plurality/majority system which uses single member districts and candidate-centred voting.

especially older, white, English men' – who at the time felt alienated by a modernising Conservative Party's turn to social liberalism (Wellings and Baxendale 2015, 228).

UKIP reframed anti-EU politics in terms of ill-defined but emotive issues like immigration and 'political correctness', drawing on a seam of traditional conservatism that Stuart Hall has called 'organic patriotic Toryism' (Tournier-Sol 2015). In doing so, they made EU membership a wedge issue that opened divisions not only in the ruling Conservative Party, but also within the wider population. UKIP thus came to present an existential threat to the Conservative Party that its leader, David Cameron, concluded could only be neutralised by allowing the in/out referendum that was their *raison d'etre* (Tournier-Sol 2015).

UKIP's 'winning formula' blended Conservative traditions and dormant Euroscepticism with populism that tapped into contemporary political currents, particularly in the countryside (Tournier-Sol 2015). UKIP's rural politics were more concerned with the rhetorical defence of traditional landscapes, punctuated by village pubs and hunting parties (and despoiled by wind turbines), than with tackling the material hardships faced by rural communities that had been exacerbated by austerity policies (Brooks 2020). This articulation of a 'politics of the rural' – focused less on substantive rural concerns than on contesting what constitutes 'the rural' (Woods 2005) – was prefigured by a rural protest movement that had occurred two decades earlier.

The 1990s were an uncertain time for rural areas, characterised by deagrarianisation, counter-urbanisation and gentrification. While elsewhere in Europe such conditions might have produced a left-wing agrarian populist response; in rural England a hegemonic 'conservative discourse of rurality' (Woods 2005) maintained its grip. This discourse emphasised the importance of maintaining the social order, and the countryside's historical role as repository of the 'national spirit and character' (Woods 2005).

In the 1997 election, the Labour Party (led by Tony Blair) won a landslide victory that extended, for the first time, into Tory rural heartlands, enabling it to enact its own distinct rural policy platform. The scale of their defeat was traumatic for the Conservative Party, which 'found itself with fewer MPs than at any time since 1906' (Ward 2002, 172). The loss was keenly felt by rural elites, who faced a 'crisis of representation' as the party vehicle through which their interests were traditionally secured entered the political wilderness (Ward 2002). The intention of the Labour government to introduce a hunting ban acted as a lightning rod for a very English protest. A rapidly assembled 'Countryside Alliance' framed the mobilization as a defence of a rural 'way of life' under threat from an 'amorphous un-English, un-British urbanity' (Woods 2005, 114-115). A series of London protests culminated in a 'Liberty and Livelihood March' in 2002, attended by 400,000 people. However, livelihood issues raised by rural working-class participants (not all of whom were there voluntarily) were side-lined by a movement animated to defend a timeless 'natural order' that the traditional hunting party symbolised (Woods 2005).

The Countryside Alliance played an important role in the rehabilitation of the political right. For former Conservative Party officials and MPs, the Alliance provided a refuge from the post-1997 political wilderness in which they found themselves, and a platform from which to begin the long road to political recovery (Ward 2002). However, by 2005, and three lost elections later, the new party leader David Cameron followed calls to cast off the 'nasty party' image (White and Perkins 2002) and steer the Conservatives in a more socially liberal direction. This resulted in the party's electoral success in 2010, albeit in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. In the meantime, Cameron continued to make concessions to the party's Eurosceptic wing that did little to prevent them from becoming increasingly emboldened by – and fearful of – the rising popularity of UKIP (Bale 2016; Tournier-Sol 2015).

In January 2020, the UK exited the EU and began a one-year transition period during which new arrangements for cooperation with the EU would be negotiated. In 3.5 years since the

referendum, the ruling Conservative Party had weathered two snap elections, two changes of leader, and a series of parliamentary and legal challenges, culminating in the wholesale capture of the pro-Brexit vote with the slogan 'Get Brexit Done' (Perrigo 2019). The Conservative Party had – again – transformed itself; this time into the voice of Anglo-British nationalism, marginalising smaller pro-Brexit parties like UKIP and the Brexit Party.

The rural economy now faces new challenges with the loss of migrant labour in the horticulture industry, particularly in Lincolnshire constituencies where the highest Leave votes were polled (Kauffman 2016). Meanwhile, concerns are rising among farmers' representatives and some rural Conservative MPs that agriculture, especially family farms, will be sacrificed in trade negotiations that prioritise continuity for the prized financial sector above all else (Lang, 2020). These challenges have intensified in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Labour shortages have been exacerbated by the lockdown as a yet more severe brake on freedom of movement, for which attempts to mobilise wartime spirit with a call for a 'land army' have failed to compensate, leading producers to charter planes to fly in workers from Romania at the risk of accelerating the spread of the pandemic (Pencheva 2020).

3.4. The Role of Land Sales in Populist Mobilisation in Ukraine

Land issues have long been of critical concern in Ukrainian society. Historically, the fertile arable land – known as '*cheronozem'* – played an important role in the Ukrainian national identity and nationalist mobilisation against foreign colonization (Shulman 1999). Today, the land question is the key political and ideological question in Ukraine, as the country has been struggling to forge an independent path, torn between Europe and Russia (Mamonova 2018). The current government's plan to lift the moratorium on farmland sales – which has been in

place for 16 years – has brought into play various populist and nationalist forces and triggered societal unrest across the country.

Since Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, its government launched a land reform aimed to distribute the former collective lands to the rural population for private farming. The land reform was never completed and the moratorium on farmland sales was implemented to prevent land concentration. Nevertheless, large multinational corporations and domestic oligarchs were able to accumulate vast areas of land, primarily by leasing land parcels from impoverished rural populations (Mamonova 2015). Thereby, Ukraine followed the path of other post-Soviet countries, such as Russia and Kazakhstan, where large agribusiness controls the most land, while rural populations conduct subsistence (peasant-like) farming on their tiny household plots (Visser and Spoor 2011).

The 2014 Euromaidan revolution aimed to break up with the Soviet past and step on the way of a 'bright' European future (Ryabchuk 2014). Most rural Ukrainians believed that the Association Agreement with the EU and consequent Eurointegration of Ukraine would bring prosperity and justice to the countryside. Mamonova (2018) observed transformation in popular attitudes towards small-scale farming as a result of the pro-European shift in the country's politics. Previously, subsistence farming was seen as a backward relic of the socialist past that is doomed to disappear in the nearest future. After Euromaidan, it became viewed as sustainable food production similar to organic and eco-farming in Europe (Mamonova 2018).

While striving for European norms and values, Ukrainians did not foresee that the Association Agreement would imply the abolition of the moratorium on land sales. The upcoming opening of the land market has triggered various fears in the Ukrainian society. According to the USAID public opinion poll, people were afraid that the open land market would lead to massive land purchases by foreigners (51%), excessive concentration of land (39%), and destruction of the Ukrainian villages (33%) (Yaremko *et al*. 2017). Consequently, most people (68.9%) believe

that the land reform should be submitted to a nationwide referendum and 72.0% of those would vote in favour of extending the moratorium (Razumkov Centre 2020).

The societal resentment against the abolition of the moratorium gave a wide base of support for farmers protests, organised by agrarian and farmers unions in 2019. Farmers condemned the land market opening conditions and prophesied massive land grabs. Protests intensified in November 2019, when the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) was discussing the land reform. Populist political parties wholeheartedly joined the protests and tried to exploit the discontent for electoral gains. The variety of politicians who supported the protests depict the diversity of Ukrainian opposition. There were representatives of the far-right 'National Corps' (Natscorpus) party, the pro-European conservative-nationalist party 'Fatherland' (Batkivshchina), the pro-Russian Eurosceptic 'Opposition Platform — For Life' (OP Za zhyttya), the extreme nationalist party 'Freedom' (Svoboda), and even the outlawed Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU).

However, while criticising the land reform, Ukrainian populists do not clearly formulate their own agrarian reform programs (see the analysis of AgroPolit [2019]). Instead, they stir up fears and make use of societal misunderstanding of the moratorium. In their political campaigns, populists use highly emotional slogans such as 'don't sell the fatherhood' or 'halt the theft of land!' warning for 'a huge civil war by the agrarian mafia against farmers' (see Kuzio's [2018] analysis of the party Batkivshchina's discourse). Some activists even brought a coffin with a pig corpse and funeral wreath flowers in front of the Verkhovna Rada to symbolise the approaching collapse of Ukrainian agriculture (Balachuk 2019).

Yaremko *et al*. (2016) studied paradoxes concerning the land market in Ukraine. They revealed that 'although almost 2/3 of the citizens protest against the abolition of the moratorium on the sale of agricultural land, almost half of them would like to have a possibility to sell their land'. This societal misunderstanding of the moratorium is the result of the fact that only 6% of

respondents study legislation on their own or read analytical reviews. The overwhelming majority of the population form their opinion based on contradictory information received from politically-biased mass media (Yaremko *et al*. 2017).

Ukrainian oligarchs play an important role in sponsoring political parties and influencing political decisions, and their influence is particularly evident in land matters (Pleines 2016). How Ukraine solves its land question will largely determine the country's development path and, therefore, the future of the Ukrainian oligarchy. For example, oligarch Igor Kolomoisky supported the current president Vladimir Zelensky in his presidential campaign. Later, Kolomoisky changed his position, when Zelensky reconsidered returning PrivatBank to Kolomoisky following the pressures from the IMF and the EU (PrivatBank was nationalised in 2016 due to banking fraud and corruption). Currently, Kolomoisky has switched to pro-Russian rhetoric and tries to sabotage Ukraine's cooperation with the IMF, particularly regarding the land reform (Troianovski 2019). He became an informal sponsor of the All-Ukrainian Agrarian Council that organised the mass farmers protests in November 2019 (Pirozhok and Denkov 2019).

The conditions of the moratorium abolition were also criticised by left-wing progressive rural movements – such as Ukrainian Rural Development Network. Yet, they are concerned about peasant rights and the future of small-scale farming, which could be jeopardised by the land market liberalisation. While not inherently opposing the moratorium abolition, these groups aim to reformulate the moratorium-related discourse by substituting the 'accent on the peasants' right to sell their land plots, [with] the accent on the peasants' land ownership as the means to provide decent existence for themselves and their families' (URDN 2019).

On 31 March 2020, when gatherings were forbidden amid the Covid-19 lockdown, the Verkhovna Rada adopted amendments to the Land Code that would lift the moratorium on farmland sales from 1 July 2021. To prevent land concentration, the amount of land in one's

hands is limited to 100 hectares during the transition period until 2024, and after – to 10 000 hectares. Land ownership for foreigners will be allowed only after a referendum (gov.ua 2020). However, not everyone is satisfied with these amendments and protests will most likely resume when the quarantine restrictions are lifted.

4. Discussion

The four cases presented above provide insights into multifaceted, historically conditioned and context-specific manifestations of nationalist politics. Below, we discuss several distinctive and common features that could help to elaborate an account of 'actually existing' right-wing populism. As we briefly point out throughout our discussion, all of these features connect with classic and contemporary themes of critical agrarian studies and its effort to understand how "agrarian life and livelihoods shape and are shaped by the politics, economics and social worlds of modernity" (Edelman and Wolford 2017: 960).

4.1. Territorial Dimension of Right-Wing Selective Memory

Our study confirms that orientation towards an idealized past is one of the defining features of far-right populism (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020a). The four analysed cases reveal that the right-wing memory of the past has a selective nature: populists tend to highlight some facts while forgetting inconvenient others. Indeed, if nations are imagined communities (Anderson 1991), the images that are selected to build this imagination must be critically analyzed. In Spain and the UK, populists have reached for imagery that links rurality with ideas of the true nation 'not yet corrupted' by 'foreign' influences. In both cases, the images interweaving rurality and nationhood conjure nostalgia for an imperial past, which in Spain becomes most obvious through reference to the Reconquista. In the UK, they recall the ties that once bound

colonial era administrators, settlers and servicemen alike to idealised images of 'home' where timeless rural traditions were upheld by a 'natural' social order.

In Ukraine, the relationship with the past is just as pertinent but the formulation is a very different one. In contrast with the UK, in which a break with the EU is seen as a way to reconnect with the past, for most Ukrainians their country's accession to Europe is a means to break with the Soviet past and 'return to normality' – the metaphor which captures the transformation embarked on in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states (Wolczuk 2001). However, far from a clear break, the Ukrainian 'return to normality' has opened up the Pandora's Box of land politics which has lain at the heart of the country's politics since 1991. In eastern Germany, the socialist past experiences and the post-1990 transformation carved nationalist manifestations in another way. There, the 'return to normality' through German reunification has resulted in socio-spatial polarisation and persistent inequalities between eastern and western states, which triggered the feelings of being 'second class citizens' among many eastern Germans. The image of 'dying villages' of eastern Germany is being used by right-wing nationalists as an ideological symbol and as target areas for infiltration. Again, there is a historical precedent for Völkische Siedler settlers who style themselves according to the 'blood and soil' ruralism of the Artemans movement in the Nazi era.

In the four cases analyzed we observe that the memories being selected and idealized are part of the changing articulation between country and city. As Raymond Williams (1973) argued, this articulation has as much to do with material transformations as with the ways in which the relationship between country and city is constantly reimagined to serve political agendas, often structured around allegedly neutral definitions of 'modernity', 'development' or the 'nation' (Baka 2017). Because of its historical and constructed character, selective memory is bound to be the object of contention and competing forms of manipulation. This can be appreciated by observing that in all our cases right-wing selective memory has a territorial dimension. In the

UK and Spain, we see a story of multiple nationalisms: from the secessionist movements of Catalonia and Scotland that gravitate towards progressive politics, to nationalisms attached to imperial identities that identify with the political right. Popular mobilisation for Brexit tapped into a suppressed English nationalism that mourned its loss of power and status, globally, through decolonisation, and internally, with the creation of devolved assemblies in other UK nations. This nationalism draws on a sense of Englishness rooted in an imagery of pastoral landscapes characteristic of more wealthy rural areas of southern counties of England, an association consciously cultivated by government propaganda in the early twentieth century (Matless 2016). Similarly, the 'immortal nation' called forth by Vox is quintessentially Castilian, identified with the political right at least since the Francoist dictatorship. This helps explain why the nostalgic allure of España vacía has worked its magic at a distance, with populations in affluent districts close to Madrid, and in rural areas dominated by agribusiness that employ migrant labour. What these areas of Vox support have in common is a history of support for right-wing politics in which this kind of imagery has proved resonant in the past. Displacements such as this show how nostalgic rural imagery anchored in specific locations can have as much, or in this case even more salience among populations located far from the region that has animated this type of populist politics.

The territorial dimension of Ukraine's selective memory manifests itself in two kinds of nationalism: 'liberationist and pro-European patriotism' in western Ukraine and the separatist mobilisation in eastern Ukraine that is nationalistically inclined toward Russia (Mamonova 2018). The ongoing land reform is highly important in highlighting this division: the country's development path will largely depend on how Ukraine answers its land question. Ukrainian populists, both 'pro-Western' and 'pro-Russian', exploit societal fears of a resurgence of land grabbing following the anticipated lifting of the land moratorium. Yet, our analysis shows that the parties themselves are instrumentalised by oligarchs more interested in jostling for power

than resolving the land question. In Germany, the east-west divide defines the character and intensity of nationalist mobilisation (eastern German society is more tolerant towards everyday expressions of authoritarian and nationalistic attitudes, than western German population). Besides that, the territorial division highlights the longstanding politico-cultural lines of conflict in Germany: between the cosmopolitan Western regions and conservative areas in the interior of the country, between the industrial North and the agricultural South, and, generally, between urban and rural regions (Vorländer *et al*. 2018).

4.2. The Problem with Democracy

Our four cases highlighted several shortcomings in the system of representative democracy, both in terms of specific characteristics of electoral systems, and societal perceptions of the ideas of liberal (market-oriented) democracy. In Spain, the electoral system is key to understanding some paradoxical features pervading the political institutional representation of the countryside. Thus, whereas the electoral law privileges lowly populated (*i.e.* rural) provinces, the high percentage of vote (around 20%) required to obtain representation promotes the 'useful vote' to established parties, thus discouraging electoral competition and new entrants. This helps explain why rural and agrarian concerns are underrepresented in political and electoral debates even when the rural vote is overrepresented. On the other hand, the phenomenon of the useful vote places limits on the capacity of the electoral system to represent rural politics, for whereas political representation tends to be very stable, underlying political currents are much more volatile. Thus, if at some point there is a switch in political representation, with Vox or another right-wing populist party obtaining high voting percentages, this situation is likely to perpetuate in time. This underlying volatility can also be observed in the case of eastern Germany, where philo-Nazi settlers have taken advantage of the emptying of the countryside to achieve positions of municipal power, a circumstance that

suggests the importance of considering local-level electoral politics to understand the (quiet) rise of right-wing populism.

The paradox of political representation discussed for the Spanish case is clearly at play in the UK case. The UK's two-party system has traditionally been regarded as inherently discouraging of political extremes as it rewards parties able to build broad national appeal. 'No party, it was argued, could simply give up on half the electorate' (Drutman 2018). These assurances have unravelled in recent years with the rise of 'wedge politics', that is the use of emotional (wedge) issues to divide the electorate into two opposing sides. However, the electoral power of these divisive, emotional issues could only come into full force once they were played in electoral contests, such as referendums, that circumvent the established system of representation. This is perfectly illustrated in the redrawing of the country's political map in terms of 'Remain' and 'Leave' areas, a shift all the more remarkable given that the question of EU membership was previously a niche concern (Wellings and Baxingdale 2015). The unexpected surge in popularity of the 'Leave' cause, sufficient to tip the result towards a narrow Leave majority, came particularly from citizens holding socially conservative and/or authoritarian values (Norris and Inglehart 2019). As such, this reflected a previously unremarked geographical redistribution of political power from urban centres to rural areas and small towns whose voters were distributed across the electoral system 'more efficiently' (Beckett 2016).

In post-socialist European countries, systemic transformations were associated with the democratisation process, including the establishment and consolidation of democratic political institutions. As shown in the eastern Germany case, democracy is recognized by many as a desired form of governance, yet it is still experienced as 'foreign', 'borrowed from the West'. This (mis)impression grounded the societal support for national variations of democracies 'with adjectives', such as illiberal democracy in Hungary or sovereign democracy in Russia (see Mamonova [2019]). The illiberal turn in Eastern European political development is not

surprising. According to Humphrey (2002, 12), the ongoing capitalist development in post-socialist countries is not unidirectional: 'there is rather an unpredictable propensity to 'turn back', or at least resolute refusal to abandon values and expectations associated with socialism'.

The Eastern European 'reverse wave' of democratic breakdowns is also related to the ways of how democracy is operationalised within the European Union. Klumbyte (2011) argued that rising nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe is embedded in the power politics of Europeanization. The post-socialist European countries are typically portrayed as 'less advanced [...] and imaginary provinces of the EU' and that their political and economic interests are often sacrificed in favour of Western Europe (*ibid*, 869). The unequal distribution of power, authority, and privilege within the EU results in societal reassertions of national superiority and its newly rediscovered 'Easternness'. In Ukraine, however, the politics of national redefinition are related to the country's association with the EU. Yet, the recently ratified EU-Ukraine Association Agreement requires liberalisation of the Ukrainian land market, which, in turn, triggered societal fears about foreigners buying up the 'fertile arable land' that is an intrinsic part of Ukrainian national identity.

The problem of the political representation of rural dwellers - codified in Marx's infamous reference to the 'sack of potatoes' - is one of the central concerns of some of the foundational references of critical agrarian studies, such as Wolf (1969) and Moore (1966). The distance towards the capitalist, state and seigneurial powers to which the peasantry has been historically subordinated is experienced both as a curse and an aspiration: 'The peasant utopia is the free village, untrammeled by tax collectors, labor recruiters, large landowners, officials. Ruled over, but never ruling, they also lack acquaintance with the operation of the state as a complex machinery, experiencing it only as a "cold monster"' (Wolf 1969: 294). Our cases suggest that rural areas and groups have historically developed particular political dynamics and cultures that democratic mechanisms of representation are seldom able and often unwilling to

acknowledge, and in so doing they open the door for the siren songs of right-wing populists promising direct representation and the righting of historical wrongs through a strong leadership.

4.3. Inequalities and Politics of Emotion

European rural dwellers tend to suffer from three interconnected forms of inequality, which we may call economic, social, and cultural. Cultural inequality is expressed in the mainstream rejection of some of the practices and values that rural populations hold (local traditions, hunting, etc.), but also with the stigma of backwardness (often coupled with that of apoliticism) associated with rural living, peasant identities, and farming livelihoods. These stereotypes have a material base in the other two forms of inequality: economic inequality (*i.e.* the progressive impoverishment of the European countryside) and social inequality (the fact that basic social infrastructure – such as hospitals, schools, communications and transport – is crumbling or simply lacking). These inequalities are inseparable of the growing feeling among the rural population of being abandoned and disrespected, leading to resentment and shame. Right-wing politicians have shrewdly oriented this powerful emotional reservoir towards their own exclusionary agenda, as indicated in the cases of eastern Germany and, to a lesser extent, Spain.

The highlighted inequalities intertwine with anxieties over how the future may unfold. Fear of the future is most acutely felt by groups that anticipate precarisation. It is the threat, more than the actuality, of declassement, or loss of social and material status, that induces feelings of shame and resentment. In this regard, nostalgia is rather a restorative discourse, through which an individual reclaims one's own dignity and respect (Klumbytė 2010). As noted in the UK example, this is often gendered. Even though men are at a greater advantage overall in the labour market, they feel more threatened as their advantages are linked to the currently receding

jobs, while new jobs have been in service industries where they do not enjoy the same advantage relative to women (Salmela and von Scheve 2017).

As evident from our study, right-wing politicians capitalise on the nostalgia for the past. They often utilize false notions of a common European - or in the case of the UK, exceptionalist Anglo-British - history and Christian heritage to justify their xenophobic, anti-immigration, anti-globalization, and monoculturalist political attitudes. Such politics of emotion manifest themselves in Vox's motto to 'Make Spain Great Again' and Brexit slogan 'Take back control'. Right-wing politicians often blame Muslim minorities and refugees for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from local people. However, as the case study of eastern Germany demonstrates, resentments towards Islam and Islamisation are not central motivations for right-wing supporters. On the contrary, Dresden protesters joined the far-right PEGIDA movement not because but despite its anti-Islam agenda. Thus, we argue that socio-economic inequalities are the fundamental driving force in defining political cleavages and conflicts in rural Europe today.

The emotional appeals drawing on rural imagery can have a broader appeal where such imagery is evocative of a national identity. Particularly where this identity is based on a notion of nationhood that is somehow under threat. This is evident in Ukraine, where populists use emotional appeals like 'don't sell the fatherhood' and forecast a decay of Ukrainian villages and, by extension, Ukrainian nation if the moratorium on land sales is lifted. In the UK case, UKIP's politicisation of traditional rural landscapes perceived as under threat from 'politically-correct' environmentalists was prefigured by the reactionary rural movement spearheaded by the Countryside Alliance in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which saw itself as an emotional response to a left of centre government claiming legitimacy to legislate on matters affecting ways of life in the countryside (Woods 2010).

The connection between inequality and emotion allows many classical themes of agrarian studies to be reconsidered. How rural residents cope with and make sense of the changes within their communities influence their self-definitions, perspectives on rural life, and previously taken-for-granted notions of gender, racial-ethnic, and class relations (Naples 1994). Although the themes of gender, class and ethnicity have only been briefly touched upon in this paper, our research highlighted the need to understand how inequality and politics of emotions translate into distinct political affects that can be mobilized in multiple and contradictory directions.

4.4. The Role of 'Emptiness'

The phenomenon of 'emptiness' found across rural Europe is a concrete historical formation that has arisen as a result of neoliberal policies that draw capital away from regions with a low rate of profit. It has been particularly severe in countries where socialist modernity has been replaced by a capitalist modernity that has failed to live up to its promises (Dzenovska 2020). In the eastern Germany case, for example, initial speculative activity soon waned and regions like rural Saxony came to resemble a 'socio-economic vacuum'. Its inhabitants' sense of relative disadvantage in an otherwise wealthy country made them receptive to incoming settlers whose right-wing ideology is embedded in a homely conservatism that coheres with rural traditions and promises to bring 'dying villages' back to life. Through this rural activism that appears apolitical – embodying principles of hard work, neighbourliness, and family values – the neo-Nazi settlers are able to stifle support for progressive politics that, in contrast, appears to threaten the rehabilitation of rural traditions of which the settlers are now the defenders.

The case of Spain provides an interesting contrast with eastern Germany. Right-wing populists attempted to mobilize the apparently neutral idea of 'empty Spain', but left of centre parties were able to reframe this discourse to one that centred on a rural Spain 'emptied' by failed

neoliberal policies. For Fernández (2019b) this achievement signalled that 'a new political subject entered the scene, one that situated the territorial debate in broader terms.' Furthermore, the name with which this demonstration was branded – 'The Revolt of the Emptied Spain' – makes evident that emotional politics are not the exclusive patrimony of the populist right, and that multi-class, left-leaning alliances can (perhaps should) also aim to mobilize feelings of indignation that have long been brewing in a politically-neglected countryside ravaged by depopulation and decades of neoliberal restructuring.

In the UK, the Brexit mobilisation drew on an idealised image of rurality anchored in rural areas that represent the winning side of neoliberal globalization: gentrified landscapes within commuting distance of thriving urban centres in the South of England. While the term emptiness may not have acquired the same salience here as in Spain, these areas have increasingly been emptied of viable employment and affordable housing for the rural working class in this 'consumption countryside' (Marsden 1999). Nevertheless, as in the case of Spain, the strongest support for Brexit came from a very different rural region; one that has been transformed by an intensification of agricultural production driven by the demands of supermarket chains (Rogaly 2008). Indeed, while the rural vote for Brexit was higher than for the country as a whole (55% as opposed to 52%), the highest polls for exiting the EU (between 70-75%) were in constituencies in Lincolnshire (Electoral Commission 2016). With some of the best agricultural land in the country, much of the farming in this county is highly mechanised, with the exception of horticulture producers to the south of the county that rely heavily on seasonal migrant labour from other EU countries (Kaufmann 2016).

Ukrainian and Eastern Germany's rural emptiness is part of the larger process of post-socialist reconfiguration of political and economic power under neoliberal capitalism. The emergence of stagnant 'dying villages' used to be discussed as a temporary side-effect – an unavoidable 'correction' on the way of 'a return to normality' and 'catching-up with the West'. Yet, as

Dzenovska (2020, p.11) rightly pointed out, post-socialist emptiness cannot be fixed via reintegration or catching up, it is rather a path towards a 'radically different future' in which those who live the present will have no part. The societal disappointment with the liberal politics of post-socialist transition and the elites responsible for implementing these reforms is ardently manipulated by populist political parties and nationalist movements for their political gains.

The theme of emptiness connects with processes of capitalist domination and appropriation of rural landscapes, which has been a central topic of recent research in critical agrarian studies (see, for instance, Borras et al. 2011). The production of emptiness needs to be analyzed as part of capital's tendency to produce uneven development (Walker 1978; Harvey 1999): Spatial differentiation and capital mobility result in concentration of capital flows and statecraft in 'global cities', while places of low use-value for capital become the zones of 'emptiness' (Dzenovska 2020; Harvey 2014). The tendency to view rural emptiness in Eastern Europe as a byproduct of 'catching up' obscures a more likely explanation; that the postsocialist transition has in fact 'propelled Eastern Europe from Europe's past to Europe's future'. Today, the region is 'ahead [of] rather than behind' the rest of Europe 'with regard to implementing radical neoliberal reforms' (Dzenovska 2018, p. 24).

The 'lumpen geography of capital' (Walker 1978) produces at the same time an uneven development of the surplus population - a new 'class' of 'three nothings' — no land, no work, no social security (Walker 2008, Li 2017). According to Li (2017; see also Smith 2011), these are people who find themselves 'surplus' to the needs of capital, hence highly vulnerable in a global economy organized on capitalist lines. In this context, the rise of regressive populism may be interpreted as a form of revolt of some sections of the 'surplus population' against the existing capitalist order. Thus, our cases suggest the need to analyse how processes of capitalist

development and appropriation generate specific forms of political subjectivity that can either support or challenge the existing status quo.

5. Conclusion

This study depicts various manifestations of what we call 'actually existing' right-wing populism. Based on empirical insights from eastern Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Ukraine, we explored how xenophobic nationalist tendencies unfold in different contexts and what role agriculture and rural imageries play in this process. We demonstrate that rural communities are severely affected by the crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism and the related crisis of representative democracies, which triggered rural resentment against the existing order. This resentment manifests itself in rural support for right-wing populist parties and in grassroots nationalist movements. We analysed various drivers of populist success, including some contextual factors (rural 'emptiness', socio-economic inequality, particularities of electoral systems, outcomes of post-socialist 'return to normality', politics of Europeanization) and citizens' perceptions of social reality (selective memory, subjective experiences of democracy, national redefinition, politics of emotions).

We conclude that the forms that right-wing populism takes vary widely, therefore, solutions to these dangerous trends should be context-specific, grounded in the social fabric and culture of the locale. We believe that top-down 'one size fits all' strategy would not be effective. The resistance and alternatives should come from below. In the examples of Spain and Ukraine, we demonstrate how progressive left-leaning rural social movements were able to contest the right-wing narratives and stream them in more progressive directions.

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Natalia Mamonova is a researcher in the Russia and Eurasia Programme of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and an affiliated researcher at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies (IRES) of Uppsala University, Sweden. She is also the principal coordinator of the European team of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI Europe: https://www.facebook.com/groups/235539647275100/). Her research interests focus on contemporary rural politics in post-socialist Europe. Natalia received her PhD degree in 2016 from the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University, the Netherlands. Since then, she was a visiting researcher at the University of Oxford, the New Europe College in Bucharest, and the University of Helsinki. Email: Natalia.Mamonova@ui.se

Jaume Franquesa is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at The State University of New York at Buffalo. He writes on rural politics and livelihoods, and on natural resources and the commodification of nature, and is co-coordinator of the European team of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative. His latest book is *Power struggles: Dignity, value, and the renewable energy frontier in rural Spain* (Indiana University Press, 2018). Email: jaume@buffalo.edu

Sally Brooks is an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work and a member of the Interdisciplinary Global Development Centre at the University of York. Her research centres on critical examination of global development imaginaries, interventions and institutions. Much of this work has focused on efforts to bring about agrarian modernisation as part of what Raj Patel has called the 'long' Green Revolution. Recent publications include Brexit and the Politics of the Rural (*Socialogia Ruralis*, 2020). Email: sally.brooks@york.ac.uk; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000–0002–1005–1245.