

## Article

# Populism, Austerity and Governance for Sustainable Development in Troubled Times: Introduction to Special Issue

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**Abstract:** The sustainable development imaginary was built on a belief in co-operation, collaboration and consensus building and requires governance approaches that rely upon the values of a liberal, pluralistic, tolerant, and democratic society. Much scholarship assumed that the European Post-War, welfare, democratic order, with its emerging educated classes, would steadily progress towards an ever more refined and articulated version of these governance values. However, that governance imaginary has become increasingly deradicalised, focused instead on economic efficiency and technocracy. Our current ‘troubled times’ have now seen the rise of right populism and the imposition of austerity policies in Europe. Against this background, six key characteristics of sustainable development are examined through a governance lens—limits to growth, equity, inclusion, reflexivity, participation, and international solidarity—showing how right populism and austerity have further reshaped ideas about how to govern for sustainable development. Right populism and austerity have constrained both the narratives and tools available, while shrinking the political space for co-operation, reflection, and learning, poorly reflecting the governance values thought necessary to achieve an equitable and environmentally sustainable future. This has been further seen in the contested governance of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies designed to ensure post-Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic economic recovery.

**Keywords:** right populism; centralisation; European Union; marketisation; growth limits; equity; multi-level governance; inclusion; participation; international solidarity



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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this Special Issue is to explore how the twin contemporary political trends of national and transnational austerity policies and the growth of right populism may act as further barriers to the use of governance styles that were envisaged by the sustainable development imaginary, as established by the Brundtland Report [1]. This development model recognises environmental limits to growth and the need to adjust development to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is based on the normative principles of solidarity, inter and intra-generational equity and gender equality, and is founded on trust in the ability of both global and national actors to deliver managed socio-economic change. In this context, the concept ‘governance’ can be understood not only as a description of changing patterns in the way in which society is steered but as a normative prescription, that is, to describe the type of steering that *should* be adopted to achieve a preferred societal end point [2]. Thus, it is useful to distinguish between views on how sustainable development ought to be governed (governance for) and to explore how sustainable development has come to be governed in practice (governance of) [3]. Governance for sustainable development refers to establishing and utilising governance processes that are orientated towards the steering of societal development in keeping with the earth’s finite resources [3,4]. This also links governance to issues of political legitimacy and social justice, involving governance methods and mechanisms that are perceived as legitimate, effective, and fair [5]. This approach fosters

more inclusive and deliberative forms of decision-making [6,7]. Promoting sustainable development is also viewed as requiring complex systems of multi-level governance [3]. In addition, this steering activity requires institutional ‘fit’ with ecological systems and scales [8], and new, reflexive approaches that acknowledge the inherent uncertainty that is involved in steering [9]. These approaches to governance have transformative potential—by enhancing transparency and creating opportunities for engagement and accountability they can lead to more legitimate decision-making processes and more socially desirable sustainability outcomes [10].

While many of these governance requirements remained largely within the realm of ideas, changes in the pattern of governance were nonetheless facilitated by an expanding global governance architecture, with new international framework conventions and institutional arrangements setting the boundaries for both state and stakeholder actions. Rather than the unfolding of advanced forms of democratic governance, however, the governance of sustainable development became de-radicalized, with a loosening of ties to the dimensions of democracy, justice and equity as envisaged in the sustainable development imaginary. Instead, sustainable development governance followed wider public policy trends towards managerialism, technocratic transitions (particularly in energy), a neo-liberal stress on the importance of market instruments [11], an emphasis on individual behaviour and responsibility, while the use of more open, deliberative participatory processes proved less widespread. Thus, much of the focus of efforts has been on the governance of sustainable development. This has served to reduce governance to the mere technocratic management of non-conflicting affairs [12].

The political landscape has further changed during the first two decades of the 21st century. The sustainable development imaginary was built on a belief that the world could—and should—be characterized by co-operation, collaboration, and consensus building. It is fair to say that, in the closing decades of the 20th century, many environmental political theorists working in the field simply assumed that these conditions would prevail and that the post-war, welfare, democratic order, with its emerging educated classes, would steadily progress towards an ever more refined and articulated version of these governance values. However, the financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies, increasing income and wealth inequalities, international insecurity, and migration [13,14] and more recently the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have created a hostile context for the principles of solidarity, international collaboration, and open participative processes on which ideals about sustainable development governance were founded. Ideals about how to govern for sustainable development, forged during a period of relative affluence and optimism in the latter half of the twentieth century, have not achieved the degree and pace of change envisaged by their proponents and are now confronted with a very different social, economic, and political context. Indeed, although beyond the scope of this Special Issue, aspects of governance of sustainability, such as the reliance on technocracy and globalized markets, are themselves implicated in the rise of populism.

## 2. Troubled Times

### 2.1. Populism

Since the turn of the new century, Europe has seen populism largely expressed through the rise of right-wing political parties [15–18] and their ascendancy into parties in government. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of populists in power around the world increased fivefold, with 46 populist leaders or political parties having held executive office across 33 countries during this period [19]. This includes countries not only in Latin America and in Eastern and Central Europe, where populism has traditionally been most prevalent, but also in Asia and in Western Europe. Eastern and Central Europe and post-Soviet Eurasia have long been a stronghold for populist politics, where in 2018 populists held power in eight countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Serbia, and Slovakia. Elsewhere in Europe, the increasing popularity of populist parties has meant that they have featured more and more in coalition politics and in exercising influence from

within parliament. In Germany, in September 2017 voters helped make the far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) the third largest party in the Bundestag. Similarly, in Italy, elections in 2018 gave considerable gain to the right-wing alliance led by the far-right Lega Nord (now Lega), while in Spain, the centre left Spanish Socialist Workers party (PSOE) and the centre right People's Party (PP) continue to dominate politics. Other countries, such as Belgium, began to see up to a quarter of their parliaments comprised of populists, with an even higher share in Switzerland and Poland [20]. During this period, as the European Union (EU) struggled to cope with major challenges, such as the Eurozone sovereign debt and the migration crises, the emergence of a closely associated neo-nationalist, anti-EU agenda also came to dominate European politics. Under pressure from the Eurosceptic UK Independence Party, the UK Conservative Party shifted from being a pro-EU party, to being run by hard-line Brexiteers and post Brexit, the Party came to be dominated by a populist leader.

In contrast to the factors that drove past emergence of new social movements—in particular the rise of post-materialist values [21], it is economic malaise, a surge in anti-immigration sentiment, or a general discomfort arising from globalization that are seen as critical. Common to many of the crises identified by populists is a sense that the political elites across mainstream political parties have conspired to depoliticise important policy issues that should be subject to public scrutiny. A sense among citizens of abandonment by the state under austerity policies has also added to the rise of selective activism [22]. Austerity is deeply implicated in the rise of populism. Here, the call is to reassert democratic political control over domains of life seen as having been depoliticized and de-democratized [23]. However, populism also requires both political opportunity and agency for mobilisation, in particular 'strong' leaders [24]. As we discuss below, the transfer of decision-making power to nonelected bureaucrats and international organizations is often stressed in explanations of the causes of populism in Europe [25].

The more recent rise of populism has seen an 'ideational approach' gained considerable ground, where populism is understood as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people [26,27]. Populism is thin-centred because it does not provide a comprehensive political ideology, but rather is complemented by additional ideologies which, amongst other things, explain how the identity of the homogeneous people should be understood. Right-wing populism generally understands this identity in ethno-cultural terms (our 'own' people'), [28]. Xenophobic populists in Europe, for example, often define the people in ethnic terms, excluding 'aliens' (that is, immigrants and minorities), arguing that the elite favours the interests of the immigrants over those of the native people [27]. Right populism thus presents the interests of 'the people' as being under threat from 'dangerous others', including elites and outsiders, who deny the people their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice [29]. In other words, for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such but the intruder who corrupted it [30]. Appeals to 'the common people' often involve a critique of the dominant elite culture, which views the judgments, tastes, and values of ordinary citizens with suspicion. In contrast, the notion of 'the common people' vindicates the dignity, values and knowledge of groups who are seen as being excluded from power due to their sociocultural and socioeconomic status. This meaning of the people tends to be both integrative and divisive: not only does it attempt to unite an angry and silent majority, but it also tries to mobilize this majority against the 'other' which can include 'the establishment' and 'the immigrant'. This anti-elitist impetus operates alongside a critique of institutions, such as political parties, big organizations, the scientific community, and bureaucracies [27]. In this context, populism can also side-line deliberation by providing 'simple answers to complex questions' [31].

Turning to the notion of the 'general will' reveals the dark side of populism—in the sense that the notion is based on a belief in the unity of the people and on a clear

demarcation between those who do not belong to the *demos* and, consequently, are not treated as equals, and those that do. This can legitimize authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of the people. It can also feed into criticism of those institutions that seek to protect fundamental rights and, in this sense, populism can be seen to constitute an intrinsic danger to democracy [27]. Such a view comes at the expense of seeing the governance of sustainable development as an issue of common purpose [6,32,33]. The expressed endorsement of continuing growth as a mechanism to provide for generalised well-being has proved equally problematic, displacing the emphasis on limits to growth embedded in the original formulation of sustainable development [34,35].

The continuing anti-liberal stance of populist governments, and even the influence of populists not formally in power, can influence global environment governance for decades to come [36]. There is considerable and growing research on right populist parties' reaction to climate change, including populist scepticism about the scientific basis of claims about global environmental change [37]. This scepticism aligns with the emergence of climate change as part of the hegemonic discourse of international organisations [38], as discussed below. Similarly, at the national level examples abound, including the US withdrawal under Trump from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change; Brazil revoking its offer to host the 2019 UN climate conference with claims that Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon was at stake; and the increasing trend of EU right-wing populist parties to have second thoughts on previously stipulated climate targets (Hungary and Bulgaria). While rejecting the global dimensions of the environmental crisis, many populist parties nevertheless express concerns for their local and national environment. Landscapes, forests, coasts, and species are commonly constructed as objects of concern that are endangered and seen as threatened by unfettered globalisation, foreigners, immigrants, the political establishment, and even environmentalists themselves [39]. There is thus a small but growing body of research on the links between right populism and their support for environmental conservation policy, especially when this involves maintenance of traditional landscapes and other form of 'national heritage'. However, research into the links between populism and the global commitment to the pursuit of sustainable development is very limited, including as it relates to the governance of sustainability transition. While austerity brings significant implications for both the structure and aims of sustainable development governance, research examining this dimension is also limited.

## 2.2. Austerity

Austerity, enacted through both fiscal austerity and global capital restructuring, is guided by neo-liberal economic values [40]. Like populism, it is designed to skilful manipulate crisis, both practically and discursively, in this case to spread 'market rule' and reductions in public spending [41]. It has been described as a 'restructuring ethos' in that it reconfigures labour markets, public policy, and even forms of governance [42]. From a governance perspective, austerity policies have restructured and refocused governance, providing further justification for a neo-liberal, market orientated approach towards the provision and distribution of public goods.

Austerity policy, including the conditionality clauses linked to EU bailout packages following the Eurozone crisis, is varied in form and uneven in impact across place and scale [43]. Much of the research on austerity has focused on the impacts of austerity measures on public sector arenas, ranging from public health to cross cutting equality actions, and on the capacity of regional and local actors, operating downwards in the system of multi-level governance. These impacts flow from both the direct and indirect impacts of austerity on the financial situation of public authorities and on civil society organisations.

Across EU member states, austerity policies have reduced the size and capacity of the public sector and of welfare systems. It has moved public services into the private sector and promoted a narrative of competitive individualism in its withdrawal of state spending on social policy and in its tax reductions for the wealthy. It stresses the pre-eminence

of the economic in its push for deregulation and market growth and in its funding cuts to social and environmental institutions. It is an ethos which is at odds with the call of sustainable development to recognise the inherent linkages between social, environmental, and economic dimensions and to act in solidarity to live within the planet's means. It sees sustainable development as a vehicle for economic opportunity, of 'green growth', to be delivered primarily through market means.

Austerity shifts responsibility for addressing social and environmental problems to individuals, rather than seeing them as a societal, public policy issue. Increasing conditionality on the eligibility for welfare support, combined with regressive reforms, leave recipients socially excluded and reduces the sense of common 'social citizenship' [44]. This, in turn, can leave open the prospect of shifting the blame to other social group or to 'others', including immigrants or foreigners. The failure of successive neo-liberal policies to deliver prosperity, the resulting public disaffection, and the fading of the re-distributive role of the state under austerity has played an important role in the rise of right populism [45–48] and provides a fertile ground for its spread [49], although it has also galvanised new leftist movements in Spain and Greece [24,50]. Austerity is also linked to the civil protest of the *gilets jaunes* in France against benefit reductions and tax increases [51].

### 3. The Challenges to the Sustainable Development Imaginary

#### 3.1. Limits to Growth

Populism does not want to challenge the people in relation to their values and ways of life, given that the consciousness of the people, generally referred to as 'common sense', is seen as the basis of all good politics [26]. As such, it does not offer a corrective to existing, underlying values, such as consumerism and growth, that have created unsustainability. Arising in the context of felt exclusion from the benefits of prosperity, threatened by the distribution of such benefits to others, and demanding access to the 'good life', populism risks a new emphasis on growth, albeit one that should spill over its benefits only to the chosen people. Furthermore, the kind of fundamental reflection that is needed to move beyond a fixation on material progress—growth, is distant, even at odds with the urgent practicalities that are the rallying cry of populism.

The prioritisation of the economic is also reinforced under austerity, with its framing of social and environmental actions chiefly as economic opportunities that serve to extend the reach of capitalist markets, as is the case when variations of 'green growth' became an element of fiscal stimuli policy in the EU, following the financial crisis [52]. The imperative to 'go green' through marketization was intensified following the 2007–09 financial crisis, where the vision of a period of green economic growth provided a promising alternative to economic downturn [53]. Similar calls mark the contemporary narrative about post-Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic recovery.

As austerity reinforced the focus of policy and the system of governance towards economic activity, this led to a deprioritising of environmental and other protections [54]. Austerity has also brought a weakening in environmental action, from both a changing policy focus and reduced programme funding [55]. This is illustrated by reductions in the 2023–24 budget in the UK for the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs, which is expected to be 56% below 2010–11 pre-austerity levels in real terms [56], and in Greece in relation to funding for the implementation of *Natura 2000* [57].

#### 3.2. The Equity Principle

The sustainable development imaginary is marked by the inclusion of the key normative principle of inter and intra generational equity. This means that both present and future needs should be understood in terms not of how markets can satisfy preferences, but of how societies can best satisfy genuine requirements for human flourishing within and between generations. However, populism has key problems with extending any form of equity to 'others', with its sharp distinction between 'us' and 'them' serving to restrict those that are seen as having *just* access to, for example, welfare state regimes, or indeed, more

generally, even *legitimate* access to the public sphere. Populism cares about the present and to a large measure also about the past—however, it is silent about the future generations. Combine these characteristics, and we see that populism is out of alignment with the core equity principles of sustainable development.

Austerity policies have also reduced access to, and the value of, welfare payments and benefits. In contrast with the principles of equity that are core to sustainable development, austerity measures have increased inequalities and social exclusion, and this has impacted disproportionately upon the least well-off sectors of society and on women and minorities [58]. The pattern of cuts in public sector spending has also served to increase geographic inequalities by reducing the funds available to asset poor areas, both directly and indirectly through the imposition of market and competition policy [59]. This has led to concern that the social dimension of sustainable development is at risk [60].

### 3.3. Inclusion and Dialogue

While governance for sustainable development promotes a more reflexive, inclusive, and communicative forms of reason, populism relies on the narrative of crisis, citing the potential for immanent disaster to justify the taking of action that play upon the fear and discontent of citizens. Such an approach shrinks the space for reflection, especially when populism presents a post-truth narrative [61] that challenges or dismiss inconvenient facts and theories, whether these concern climate change, migration, or the longer-term environmental consequences of existing forms of economic development [62].

Similarly, austerity policy is presented as an inevitable and necessary course that precludes alternative dialogues and has been used in the EU to legitimate the controls placed on Member States' fiscal, welfare, and public sector regimes [63]. While populism rallies against the false 'truths' perpetuated by elites, it embraces the notion of 'popular truth', seen as the innate wisdom of 'the people'. This form of politics is about reaffirming 'popular' truths against 'elite' lies. Insults, allegations, and exaggerations become legitimate ways of bolstering the interests of 'the people' against the elites and the outsiders, aligning both nostalgic narratives and conspiracy theories [62]. The theatrics of vainglorious populist leaders—with their simply truths, such as 'get Brexit done', act as a countervailing, shrinking force to calls to develop new, advanced forms of democracy in pursuit of sustainable futures. Whither reflexivity, one may ask, when the truth is already known? Populism's position about truth reflects its conception of politics as conflictual and binary [64]. Posing a threat to and discrediting the politics of consensus [65] populism closes forms of governance that seek to open space for different voices and actors to engage in democratic communication. As such, we would argue, right populism is both a reflection of a crisis of representation in politics, as agreed in the literature, but also acts as a threat to the realisation of advanced forms of democratic governance. Belief that politics is a state of conflict leaves limited room for the forms of democratic communication that are required to govern sustainable development.

### 3.4. Reflexive Multi-Level Governance

Centralisation of power in the right populist president or prime minister, along with more personalised control, can be expected, especially in more authoritarian versions of populism. When in government, populist parties can also be associated with use of patronage, where the lack of trust in the existing administration will see populist elected officials seek to embed as many of their loyal followers as possible within the administrative system. This can result in the appointment of an unprofessional civil service, rewarding the faithful, not necessarily the competent [66]. Governance in a regime dominated by populism can thus expect a loss of expertise in governing [66]. With this comes the enhanced politicisation of governing, which can in turn reduce the capacity of the system of public administration to deal with the common good, a core ethical requirement embedded in the Brundtland model of sustainable development.

Austerity and EU fiscal constraints have had practical and political impacts on governance [42]. Practically, reductions in spending diminish the ability of the public sector to play its role. Shifting of government activity to the private sector has been significant across the EU under austerity [67]. They have also acted as a centralising force, reducing the scope for sub-national governments [63] and with financial pressures falling disproportionately on local or state governments [68]. The contribution from Kirsop Taylor et al. in this Special Issue shows how the imposition of competitive funding regimes under austerity has also served to concentrate power in central government in the UK, resulting in a form of state steering that moves away from the participative approach seen as important in governance for sustainable development. This political impact has had the additional effect of reducing the ability of more localised government to reflect local factors and service priorities [69], although there has been some scope for local response, depending on the specific national constitutional and administrative arrangements, as evidenced in Spain [70]. The combination of financial constraints and a refocusing of local governance structures onto narrow service delivery or economic roles reduces the autonomy of local authorities and hence the ability of multi-level governance structures to inform, moderate or tailor approaches. Taken together, austerity and EU fiscal constraints feature more centralised managerial and financial control and can therefore be seen to promote a shift away from emerging localised and participative governance towards more directive forms [71], a shift that is out of alignment with the governance characteristics that are seen as central for the promotion of sustainable development, as seen for example in the Local Agenda 21 action programme.

### 3.5. Participation

Forms of communicative and deliberative democracy are a core requirement of governance for sustainable development and both populism and austerity threaten these forms. Many scholars point to what is referred to as the ‘de-politicization’ of politics, largely in Europe, arising from and expressed in the use of closed, technocratic, managerialist approaches to governing under a neo-liberal ethos and its expression in austerity [12,72,73]. De-politicisation is both a feature of austerity policies and trigger for right populism to challenge technocratic orthodoxy on behalf of the ‘true people’ and their ‘common sense’ values. Populism tends to support political participation, since it contributes to the mobilization of social groups who feel that their concerns are not being considered by the political establishment. It is not difficult to see why right-wing populist movements would therefore demand bottom-up approaches to governance, so long as they represent the will of the people as they understand it. This can, at least in principle, improve the responsiveness of the political system, by fostering the implementation of policies preferred by excluded sectors of society. However, right wing populism would seek to limit political participation by excluding certain groups. Populism discards societal divisions, denounces social groups as ‘special interests’, and rejects compromise as defeat [74]. This seeds a distrust of new ways of doing things and blocks the opportunity to learn from dissenting opinions. While deliberative democracy is in keeping with the populist rhetoric of the virtuous and reasonable ‘general public’ [65]—its narrow views on what constitutes ‘the people’ privileges a form of what can be called ‘bounded stakeholder participation’. We suggest that participatory, open forms of governance have difficulty in finding voice in political systems now characterised by efforts to protect narrow, vested interests and hostile to alternative viewpoints—thus, the rise of populism at odds with the governance requirements needed to promote sustainable futures.

Austerity impacts in other ways, reducing governments’ capacity to engage with civil society. In contrast to the calls made in the Brundtland Report, cutbacks in public expenditure have hit heavily on environmental, as well as cultural, and social government departments and agencies. Countries across the EU have over the same period made significant structural reforms, including outsourcing of activity to the private sector [75]. In the UK, for example, this has reduced the scope for co-production or more participative approaches, as these are resource intensive activities, while pushing civil society organisa-

tions towards entry into governance as service providers, rather than through wider forms of participatory engagement (Kirsop-Taylor in this Special Issue).

### 3.6. *International Solidarity*

The pursuit of sustainable development, especially as articulated by Brundtland, was built upon recognition of the linkages between the North and the Global South, the present and the future [1]. It also advocated making sustainable development a ‘global ethic’, with new and augmented legal frameworks operating nationally and internationally, stronger, and better financed environmental and natural resource agencies and sought the engagement of educators and NGOs to build board based societal support for its agenda.

In contrast, populists see a world run by shadowy elites, acting in their own interests, even if there is no narrative explaining who these elites are and why they exist. As such, populism runs counter to the spirit of international solidarity, viewing negotiation as zero-sum games, including those related to trade and climate [76]. In other words, for the populist, environmentalism forms part of a liberal, internationalist agenda that is focused on building global treaties and forging inclusive alliances that runs counter to the nativist and anti-pluralist ideals of most populist parties [31]. Furthermore, globalization has seen international competition for footloose capital based on cheaper labour that has concentrated wealth, while increasing inequalities, and reduced income and social protection for workers. The economic grievances that this gives rise to are seen as implicated in the rise of populism [77]. In addition, populist groups question the legitimacy of increasingly intrusive international institutions and of decision making from actors that operate above the nation state [78]. This served to feed the growing sense that the state is no longer responsive to citizen needs [12,79]. What is seen as the downplaying of national priorities both alienates and energizes the moral appeal of the ‘people’ for recognition and representation [80]. But such efforts to re-territorialise political rule bode ill for the governance of sustainable development, given the latter’s strong focus on the need for global solidarity and action, as mentioned above. Populism also displays no interest in addressing the causes of global inequality. Rather, what they wish to do is to extend the logic of exclusion to the bottom rung of society, to the refugee or the migrant worker—seeking to legitimise the politics of exclusion. This makes the pursuit of sustainable development more challenging and can be seen to represent a push against the global practice of humanitarianism. The focus on internal security, on borders, migrants, and terrorism has become a mainstay of current EU and Member State strategy. The preoccupation with achieving security through protectionist measures is at odds with the international solidarity needed to promote sustainable development and could bring resistance to even incremental reforms at the global level [81].

The relationship between austerity and international solidarity is less clear. The presentation of austerity as a necessity prompted by global forces can reinforce the impression of the powerlessness of national governments in the face of global structures and institutions [12]. This internationalism can be seen to constrain the room for democracy to respond to popular concerns that, in turn, has created space for the alternative politics of right populism and nationalism that may re-politicise what has become a technocratic space [79]. These alternative politics can identify a role for the Nations State in opposition to those wider global forces that are seen as having disempowered its ability to respond to the needs of ‘the people’.

## 4. **Contribution of This Special Issue**

The call for this Special Issue invited contributions on the implications for sustainable development governance of the rise of right populism from an empirical and/or theoretical standpoint. It also sought contributions on the practical impact of austerity on the nature and pursuit of sustainable development governance.

The three contributions dealing with the theme of right populism all consider the literature on right populism and its guiding values or views, drawing especially on the work



of Mudde [17]. Two contributions compare the conclusions of this literature with normative values associated with sustainable development and its governance. This evidence is taken respectively from expert stakeholder workshops (Gottenhuber and Mullholland) and analysis of a political party's policy positions (Timofeyevs). These contributions both offer conclusions as to potential bridges that could be available between drivers and interests of right populism and concerns of, and approaches to, sustainable development governance. The third contribution (Arias-Maldonado) compares the literature on right populism with the challenge of the Anthropocene. This leads to a conclusion that the gap between competing values of sustainable development and those of right populism is not readily bridgeable within participative and consensual approaches to governance.

Gottenhuber and Mullholland consider the challenges posed for sustainable development governance in the EU by the worldviews or value systems which underpin the attraction of right populism. Using empirical evidence gathered from workshops held by the European Sustainable Development Network with senior public policy makers, NGOs and academics, the paper finds that right populism draws on many of the same social and economic challenges—and uncertainties—worthwhile jobs, livelihoods, and the ability of people to have voice—which are also concerns guiding the pursuit of sustainable development, particularly as expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Reflecting on the failure of those charged with the governance of sustainable development to convey the relevance of sustainable development to the wider public, it concludes that future action should have a stronger focus on recognizing and reflecting public concerns. First, this would mean communicating the need to deliver just social and economic transitions that leave no one behind, a central premise of the SDGs. Second, it would mean that governance approaches embrace genuine participatory forms, which engage with people's concerns and motivations, in place of the more technocratically focused and restricted network and stakeholder participation practices that have taken hold. In this way, the contribution concludes, the pursuit of sustainable development may become a relevant answer to popular concerns, rather than being perceived as a threat.

Arias-Maldonado considers the dual challenge to sustainable development governance of rising right populism and the increased urgency presented by the Anthropocene and particularly the threat of climate change. He critically examines research on the implications of the Anthropocene for future planetary health, literatures on right populism, and conflicting views of the goals and appropriate forms of sustainable development governance. He finds that the strongly differing ideological positions, both towards and within sustainable development discourse, mean that the present consensual and broad socio-economic framing of sustainable development and its governance is unlikely to achieve strong (environmental) sustainability, at least with the urgency that is now required. In contrast to Gottenhuber and Mullholland, he concludes that, in the face of crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, the focus of governance and policy effort should shift in the short term to implementing urgent technocratic measures to ensure basic planetary habitability. This would replace, for now, addressing the wider socio-economic challenges posed by sustainable development, which is termed the search for a "good Anthropocene".

Timofeyevs takes the example of the popular right Estonian National Alliance Party to compare a right populist party's policy positions and approach to governance with the literature on the values underpinning both sustainable development governance and right populism. Taking evidence from the Party's political platforms and electoral manifestos between 2010 and 2018, the paper traces a complex relationship between the Party's approach and sustainable development. Considering the Party's viewpoints on environment and nature, he finds that policies are framed with a nativist conception of a 'green country', where nature and forestry have both intrinsic value and also value as an economic resource for national use. The Party frames the 'green economy' in terms of resource efficiency, eco-tourism, and energy self-sufficiency. Turning to the Party's views of governance, he traces a statist rather than participative approach to governance, though one which includes the use of market instruments alongside strong state steering. He concludes that right

populist parties that focus on ethno-nationalist arguments can reflect socio-environmental concerns relevant to sustainable development, such as conservation, the sustainable use of the natural environment, and increased energy efficiency, and are prepared to use state mechanisms, such as regulation and funding, to deliver them.

The two contributions on austerity in the Special Issue use differing empirical approaches to track the experience of those engaged with sustainable development governance in the UK over the period before and after the introduction of austerity. They conclude that narratives and policy measures associated with austerity changed both the range of tools available for sustainable development governance and the nature of governance relationships. Marvulli used empirical evidence gathered through an ethnographic study undertaken during a placement with the UK Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs to explore the impacts of austerity on sustainable development work by government officials. The contribution traces specific impacts of austerity politics on the nature of both policy advice and programme development by officials. His findings show that government policies and specific measures associated with austerity shifted the internal bureaucratic approach to one where the priority test of all actions was whether they contributed to economic growth and deregulation. This focus precluded the continued pursuit of governmental tools of behavioural change measures and of direct regulation, even where there was evidence of their effectiveness as policy tools in pursuit of sustainable development. In its place, the new yardstick for environmental policy becomes its beneficial impact on the economy, which has predominance rather than being seen in relationship to social and environmental goals. The approach is at direct odds with the systemic viewpoint and positive societal steering envisaged in governance for sustainable development.

Kirsop-Taylor traces the impact of austerity on the collaborative governance model of environmental partnerships in the UK, in which local NGOs and governmental bodies co-operate to deliver agreed goals. Drawing on evidence from interviews with participants in the managing organization of an English biosphere reserve, the contribution finds that austerity changed the relationships between NGO participants, government agencies and local authority representatives, and affected the NGOs' relationships with one another. This was caused by increased competition for funding between participants, increased direction on what was publicly fundable (which was poorly aligned with the goals of the partnership), and a distancing of government officials as they came to act less as partners in delivery and more as managers of limited financial and human resources. It concludes that austerity had the practical impact of transforming the governance role of the state from a delivery partner to a commissioner of services. This reshaping did not constitute the state 'retreat', as sometimes envisaged in the austerity literature, but rather a new form of state direction of non-governmental and agency activity using a competitive grant system.

## **5. Conclusions: Sustainable Development Governance in Troubled Times**

The contributions to the Special Issue have confirmed the cumulative impact that right populism and austerity have had on governance for sustainable development. Both have reduced the breadth of steering tools and constrained narratives of transformative change and of international solidarity. They have reinforced an inward looking, economic framing of the rationale for action on sustainability. They have also had a centralising and controlling focus that has reduced the scope for reflexive and localised action and partnership. This has contributed to a very different set of governance approaches and values to those envisaged in the founding years of sustainable development, drawn from the Brundtland Report and its UN follow-up.

Since we began work on this Special Issue, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created a new reflection of our troubled times. The pandemic has served to amplify the impacts of both populism and austerity politics. While the pandemic has seen preferences shift towards greater EU integration, not least because EU fiscal solidarity is seen as the best chance to mitigate the immense damage that pandemic related lockdowns have inflicted on the economy of EU member states [82], overall, the pandemic has exacerbated populist

tendencies. It has allowed specific leaders to utilize institutions to implement policies that are either outside of their original remit or run contrary to the usual functioning of state institutions, generating high levels of institutional volatility and uncertainty [36]. Thus, in Slovakia, a newly elected populist prime minister took the opportunity to weaken formal institutions and to legitimize responsive, often erratic, decisions in the face of the pandemic. In the Czech Republic, the pandemic helped entrenched technocratic populism. In both countries, populists used emergency powers to undermine institutional accountability and to paralyze civil society [83], reinforcing personalized ties with voters and pursuing borderline unconstitutional policies.

The pandemic also risks normalising more authoritarian and intrusive government measures [84]. At the same time, it has also stimulated a populist backlash. Across Europe and North America, there has been a documented rise in xenophobic hate during the pandemic, including in both online and off-line platforms [85]. Right populism has also fed on misinformation and disinformation about governments' responses to the pandemic and on conspiracy theories about governments' and corporations' plans to use a vaccine to microchip, neuter or control citizens, with protests government-imposed lockdown measures and other restrictions spreading, particularly during the second and third waves of the pandemic in Europe [86]. There is thus a tension between a greater thrust towards European integration and state steering, on the one hand, and, on the other, a rise of right-wing protest and populist politics. In terms of job losses and the scale of the stimulus packages, the narrative has been one of a short-term external battle to be fought rather than a long-term issue for the economic system [87]. Thus, while cosmopolitan and consumer lifestyle have been disrupted by the pandemic, the underlying values and principles upon which western forms of economic development are founded have not changed, continuing to underpin traditional, growth orientated drives to stimulate economic recovery, albeit in the language of ecological modernisation [88].

As in the 1980s, the world once again finds itself in 'troubled times' that could continue to block the delivery of a truly transformational agenda of global change. Contributors leave open the very differing possibilities, either through the re-politicisation of the sustainable development space that widens civil dialogue to embrace equity and solidarity through policies designed to keep society within planetary limits, or a continuation of a depoliticised technocratic approach within the confines of the current social and economic order. Whether this change in the governance available for the pursuit of sustainable development implies the death of the sustainable development imaginary, or a democratic impasse to be overcome, remains to be seen.

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