

## Be aware of freedom populism



Donald Trump, far rightism, and other right-wing populists across the world have used the COVID-19 pandemic to push their rhetoric and policies on as a time of crisis. But things are about to get worse.

As we clearly enter the post-pandemic era, there are signs in Europe pointing to the emergence of a new type of populism. Populists across the continent are now seeking support by claiming to be fighting "them" in the face of various COVID-19 restrictions imposed on European populations since the emergence of the novel coronavirus in early 2020.

At the present stage, the political spectrum, both in government and opposition, tend to politicise the pandemic to a certain degree, but these attempts have mostly been unsuccessful. As the virus spread among communities, overwhelmed health services, and killed tens of thousands of people, most European citizens sought only caution and responsibility from their governing authorities.

In recent months, however, the situation evolved significantly. Vaccination campaigns across Europe started to contain the crisis and weaken the pandemic. Restrictions started to gain more and more public support. As a result, populists now have a new opportunity to increase their political power by rallying people against a new theoretical enemy: the authorities trying to ensure a controlled and safe return to normalcy.

This "freedom populism" scored its first election victory in the recent election for the president of the community of Madrid – one of the seventeen autonomous communities of Spain.

In recent Madrid Community President Isabel Diaz Ayuso of the right-wing Popular Party, who ran on a promise to "liberate" the people of Madrid from the COVID-19 management restrictions of Spain's socialist government, won the regional election in a landslide.

To understand the rise of "freedom populism" in Spain and beyond, we need to recall why populism has made a comeback in recent years, what is the difference between its right-wing, left-wing and digital forms, and why it has been as timely to succeed.

In the last decade, populism emerged as a viable political strategy in Europe in response to establishment parties increasingly supporting the technocratic management of public affairs in an effort to delegitimise ideologies and reform in power. The coalition that emerged as a result of this trend sidelined right and left

in Europe. Tourists from all over Europe started visiting Madrid to escape the restrictions in their own countries. This irresponsible management strategy made the region the most deadly and infection-ridden community in Spain.

While many businesses in the region applauded Diaz Ayuso's approach to pandemic management from the very beginning, her strict anti-lockdown restrictions initially drew criticism, but only from left-wing politicians but also the general public, but as Spain's vaccination campaign started to show the effects, Diaz Ayuso used the gains the country made towards controlling the virus to claim her strategies have been effective and to silence her critics.

In March, as the regional opposition was preparing to call a no-confidence vote against her government, Diaz Ayuso called early elections, which she subsequently retained in a re-election campaign, ending a "strangling Madrid's freedom" against socialist governments in Spain. Initially, at that point, Spain's socialist federal leaders were already working on finding safe ways to ease the remaining pandemic restrictions in the country.

Soon, second degree parties that the pandemic appears to be "defeated" thanks to the success of the left-wing Podemos party, left the federal government to run against Diaz Ayuso in Madrid. In response, the remaining pandemic restrictions to "claim the elections were ending."

For populists, especially those on the right of the political spectrum, this is a opportunity. They are now rallying against "repressive" governments, abjectly limiting people's freedom, and claiming that they are fighting the pandemic to protect their own benefit. This is especially true for right-wing populists in Italy, France and Spain who maintained a low profile during the height of the pandemic.

And they are already repeating the benefits of their alleged resistance to "repressive" governments, abjectly limiting people's freedom. Diaz Ayuso of Madrid was the first European politician to raise the benefits of "freedom" during the election and presidential campaign.

Spain's Socialist government of Pedro Sanchez managed the crisis relatively well, and changed the public's priorities, populists across the political spectrum started to struggle to maintain public support.

Populism as a political strategy always relied on one, real or imagined, to rally people against a new theoretical enemy: the authorities trying to ensure a controlled and safe return to normalcy.

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## There is no good reason why Israel should not be under sanctions



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