Twitter Thread by Helene von Bismarck



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While we await white smoke signalling a #Brexit deal, let us consider what the end of the transition period on 31 Dec (deal or no deal) will mean for the future of UK politics. Will the end of the Brexit process lead to the end of British #populism? I am very sceptical.
Thread 1/

This thread serves as an English summary and translation of a long essay I published in the Swiss @RepublikMagazin last week. Contrary to its title, it is not just about @BorisJohnson 2/
https://t.co/vVCYVGJoCm

British populism is a political method, not an ideology. It is not identical with Trumpism, even if it shares some of its traits. The populist method in the UK does not become redundant with #Brexit, because its use hasn't been limited to the UK's relationship with the EU.
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The populist method in the UK consists of two key elements:
1) the emotionalization and over-simplification of highly complex issues (such as Brexit, the pandemic, migration, culture or history)
2) the reliance on bogeymen ('enemies') both abroad and at home

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Populists depend on enemies, real or imagined, to legitimize their actions and deflect from their own shortcomings. There has been an obvious candidate for the enemy abroad since 2016: the EU. But once transition is over, this may, in the long term, become more difficult.
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But even then, Mr. Johnson and his enablers will be able to rely on the 'enemies within' that they have conjured up and attacked since the referendum, and especially since he became PM in the summer of 2019: Parliament, civil servants, judges and lawyers, experts, the BBC.
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Individuals & institutions who dare to limit the power of the executive, even if it is just by asking questions, are at constant risk to be denounced as "activists" by Johnson &Co. Everyone has political motives except for the government, which seeks to define "neutrality".
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Brexit is being framed as the grand departure, the moment when the UK is finally free and sovereign, when all problems can be solved with common sense and optimism. This is used as justification for a "pragmatic" approach to rules, constitutional conventions and institutions.
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The story of the unlawful prorogation of Parliament last year is well known, but this was only one example of the worrying disregard that Mr. Johnson has shown for the institutions of parliamentary democracy and the #RuleOfLaw
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A prime example for the populist disregard of the #Ruleof Law is the Internal Market Bill, which, by the government's own admission, breaks International Law. Another one are the attacks on "leftie lawyers" or "judges in pyjamas" (who dare to do their jobs).
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Another group which has often found itself in the line of fire since 2016 is the civil service. The image of the "Remoaner cosmopolitian elite" propagated in the pro-Brexit press helps call their professional neutrality into question and opens them to personalized attack.
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The replacement of no less than six Permanent Under-Secretaries in various government departments since 2019 is remarkable. As is the fact that the idea of ministerial responsibility appears to have been abandoned. Civil servants resign, ministers stay in their places.
12/

So what is Mr. Johnson's role in all this? He is the most prominent representative of British populism, but it is vital to note that he&his populist method could not succeed without the support or at least silent acquiescence of his party and a significant part of the media.
13/

Which is why even the end of Johnson's premiership (which, btw, I do not foresee v. soon) will not necessarily entail the end of British populism. Moderate conservative politicians have been expelled from the party or left on their own accord. No populist exists in a vacuum.
14/

As for the appeal of the populist method to the electorate, I do not expect it to shrink when the transition period ends, especially not when the very real and hard consequences of the pandemic, and, from 1 January 2021 onwards, of Brexit, are only just beginning to show.
15/

It is naive to expect that a political style which ridicules complexity, presents people with bogeymen to despise, and prides itself on "doing what it necessary" even if "elites"& boring institutions get in the way, will lose its appeal in times of hardship. 16/ends