

# CHALLENGE EUROPE

## Challenges and new beginnings: Priorities for the EU's new leadership

September 2014



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## Populism in the EU: new threats to the open society?

*Heather Grabbe*

In May 2014, around one in four Europeans voted for protest parties and anti-establishment candidates in the first pan-European poll since the euro crisis began. The rise of populism across Europe has brought more extremism of various kinds into the European Parliament. It could change the balance of power between the institutions, and be detrimental to EU policies, legislation and funding that nurture open societies. This chapter will consider the impact of xenophobic populist parties,<sup>1</sup> who have also become increasingly anti-EU, not considering here the extreme left Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who entered the Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

The populist blame game is having an impact on national politics as well as at EU level. Already many parties of the centre are leaning much further to the right on migration. During national election campaigns over the next few years, they may well adopt more extremist exclusionary rhetoric on the grounds of "defending national identity" and "protecting our culture." The mainstream right and left are talking more about protecting wages and restricting labour migration from one EU country to another, as well as from outside Europe. This raises a major challenge for the new leadership of the EU institutions

Beyond rhetoric, the more xenophobic populists could attack the infrastructure that protects the most vulnerable marginalised groups, much of which was put in place at EU level. Already there is an attack on the whole concept of human rights from many populist groups, and talk of withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights in the UK. Other Member States are challenging the EU by not complying with fundamental rights principles, such as limits on freedom of expression and association in Hungary, and discriminatory collection of personal data from Roma in Italy.

### **Why are the populists doing so well?**

Populists did well in both creditor and debtor countries, showing that protest parties are thriving even where economic conditions are not so bad. Many of them straddle the old left/right political divide. In her criticism of the euro, for example, Front National leader Marine Le Pen sounds remarkably like French far-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. But her anti-migrant and anti-Muslim stances are traditional of the far right.

The angry cry from European voters deserves a deeper hearing. The easy response for mainstream parties is to hear it as a protest against the EU and migration – and jump on that bandwagon. But much deeper concerns are driving people away from mainstream parties. Recent research on first-time voters for radical parties shows that there are much deeper trends at work here – economic pain, disillusionment with politics in general and concern about how representative European democracies really are.<sup>3</sup> Many European voters are sceptical that traditional political institutions represent them anymore, including national as well as EU ones. And there is a great sense of insecurity about cultural identity and traditions being eroded right across Europe.

Voters' economic concerns will not be relieved anytime soon. The euro has stabilised, but many southern Europeans are wondering if economic dynamism and jobs will ever return. Northerners are not feeling the pain as much and may have jobs, but they are left wondering if they can rely on the welfare state to protect them as they age. The crisis revealed the dark side of globalisation – that interdependence means permanently greater vulnerability to turbulence elsewhere in the world. Even in wealthy European countries, the state has limited powers to protect citizens from insecurity and rising inequality. The world has changed, undermining the social contracts that Europeans hold dear. Taxes stay high but economic security cannot be assured. And citizens in many countries have the impression that elites serve their own interests rather than the public interest.

Populists have tapped into all these fears and resentments. They do not offer policy solutions or clear options. But they are adept at channelling frustration and hopelessness into hostility towards both elites and minorities. It is much easier to pin the blame on politicians and those on the margins of society – especially Roma, migrants and Muslims – than the faceless forces of the global economy.

### **What effect on the EU?**

The populist surge has happened just after the European Parliament gained major new powers under the Lisbon Treaty. The Parliament has the power to block EU legislation, funding, and resolutions, as well as having the ability to put political pressure on governments – but who will use it?

Anti-EU and xenophobic populist parties have nearly a third of the seats, far from a majority. They are far from unified and have many different views. Some of these MEPs have an openly racist agenda, many express xenophobic views and some use hate speech. Others disavow racism but criticise immigration.

How will they behave? In the past, populist MEPs have mainly used the Parliament as a source of personal funding and a podium from which to broadcast their messages over YouTube. They made xenophobic and anti-elite speeches in the Parliament and uploaded them to the internet, but most did not get involved in the details of parliamentary decision-making. Partly this was tactical, because anti-system MEPs were seeking to show their supporters they were not part of the system. But it was also because they disagreed on many issues, from gay marriage to Israel. Most importantly, they did not have clear policy goals that would motivate them to organise joint action or to form coalitions with other mainstream parties on particular issues.

A big change lies ahead if a better resourced and organised populist front emerges from the new party groupings that will now get public funding and more speaking opportunities. The question is which of the new groups in the Parliament will just use it to get funding and publicity for their national campaigns, and which will invest in learning the Parliament's procedures and systems.

At a minimum, the larger numbers of populists will make bolder attempts to challenge the EU political system and disrupt parliamentary business. If they use speaking time and tabling of questions to disrupt debates and voting, the President of the Parliament will find it increasingly difficult to keep order and maintain momentum behind proceedings. That will slow down legislation and approval of policies and funding. They could also bring the whole institution into disrepute if the antics of demagogues and xenophobes dominate media coverage of the Parliament.

The Parliament will be more fragmented overall, with the populists pulling many centre-right MEPs further to the right, especially on migration. That will make the European Parliament more unpredictable as its party groups lack the kind of disciplinary measures used in national parliaments such as the whip. UKIP's new political group could attract the more right-wing members of the European People's Party (EPP) to vote with it on some issues.

### **What are the implications for policies that help keep societies open?**

Given the Parliament's position as a co-legislator, populist MEPs could make it more difficult for the EU to adopt progressive legislation and policies, especially where they share common ground – for example in opposing migration, asylum, development aid, and EU standards, and policies that protect marginalised groups. They could attack EU foreign policies too, including the asylum fund and development aid, as well as human rights promotion.

Five areas to watch for populist influence are:

- The Parliament has hitherto been a stronger supporter of Roma rights and social inclusion than reluctant Member States and Commissioners. The Parliament has pressed the Commission and national governments to maintain momentum on initiatives for Roma inclusion, in particular the National Roma Integration Strategies. It has also made EU funding available for NGOs to monitor implementation of national strategies, and for programmes to promote equality. Populist MEPs could try to stop the Parliament supporting such initiatives in future by pushing centre-right parties into opposing these initiatives.
- Through election observation missions and joint parliamentary committees, MEPs have an influence in other countries beyond their powers in the EU. Populist MEPs have recently used their positions to endorse flawed elections (Azerbaijan) and to promote the rights of ethnic Hungarians over those of Roma (Serbia). An increase in these MEPs is likely to further undermine the EU's credibility and its leverage in promoting human rights in the rest of the world.
- The European Parliament will have to approve the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights. Although the EU would become more accountable to citizens if it were under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, anti-EU MEPs are likely to perceive it as giving greater powers to European institutions and favouring minorities – and so block it.

- The Parliament shares responsibility for approving the EU's budget, so populist MEPs could try to steer EU funding away from causes such as equality and social inclusion for minority groups.
- Populists could attack key parts of the EU's infrastructure that protects open societies, such as the return directive on asylum-seekers, the mandates of the Fundamental Rights Agency and the FRONTEX border agency, or the proposed mechanism to monitor fundamental rights in the Member States.

### **What can supporters of the open society do?**

An open society needs much more public defence from its many quiet supporters in Europe. Protection of rights, freedoms and diversity can no longer be taken for granted by all Europeans who have enjoyed a quarter-century of peace and tolerance. Problems are growing that can no longer be dismissed as a passing phenomenon that results just from the economic crisis.

There are four areas where concerned Europeans could focus their efforts to pull energy away from blame and fear into positive action:

1. **Limit racism in the public debate:** If many more populists start using the European Parliament to broadcast hate speech, the rise in racist rhetoric will also have an impact on national politics. How can we make it harder for populist parties to use political debate as a medium for hate speech and incitement to violence?
2. **Connect national and European politics:** In both European and national politics, centrist parties are moving towards extremes, and anti-racism norms are being eroded. How could anti-racism and pro-tolerance norms be bolstered by bringing other voices into political debates?
3. **Look deeper into how European societies are changing:** Research shows that there are many long-term trends behind the latest election results, particularly mistrust of elites, and dissatisfaction with public institutions and representative democracy. How can Europeans find fresh ideas to revitalise democratic life in their countries and make political institutions of all kinds more accountable to citizens?
4. **Increase transparency at EU level:** Citizen inclusion and participation in policy-making are required by the Lisbon Treaty but initiatives to bring citizens closer or to ensure more accountability, are either too infrequent (the European Citizens' Initiative), too shallow (the voluntary lobbyist register or MEP code of conduct), or too precarious (the 'Spitzenkandidaten' exercise). The result is a perception of poor inclusion and participation which compounds anti-elitism. The EU could improve its accountability by joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which 20 Member States have already signed up to.

## Conclusion

In response to the populist threat, the centrist EPP, Social Democrats and Liberals are likely to form a grand coalition to push through major votes where there is no ideological left/right divide. This would mean more deals between the parties behind closed doors rather than in the public debate, which is not good for democracy.

If the mainstream parties use a grand coalition primarily to maintain the *status quo*, citizens will ask why they bothered to vote. Instead, political leaders of the centre should focus on reforming the EU and delivering the benefits of European integration to citizens by making progress on issues like fundamental rights and services liberalisation. Instead of hiding behind a grand coalition, they should open up public debates about the future of European society beyond Strasbourg and Brussels. And traditional parties need to get their act together to communicate better through social media, where populist parties are much more effective.

Political leaders across Europe also need to defend the open society from rising intolerance and nationalism. The greatest benefit of living in Europe is personal freedoms that allow citizens to express their opinions, and choose lifestyles according to their values, preferences and beliefs. The EU has helped to build an infrastructure of rights and rule of law that protect these benefits and foster tolerance and diversity. European societies are an extraordinary enabling environment for people to live and let live. To let these gains be eroded by the politics of fear and hate would be a tragedy.

**Heather Grabbe is Director of the Open Society European Policy Institute.**

## Endnotes

- 1 This definition applies Cas Mudde's seminal classification of populist radical right parties to the European Parliament, as used M. Morris, [Conflicted politicians: the radical right in the European Parliament](#), Counterpoint, 2013 (pp 11-14). For the original classification, see: C. Mudde, [Populist radical right parties in Europe](#), Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- 2 For an analysis of the impact of the far left see J. Bartlett, P. Krekó, B. Hunyad, [New political actors in Europe](#), Demos, 2013.
- 3 C. Fieschi (ed), [Populist fantasies: European revolts in context](#), Counterpoint, 2013.