Event Report
BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE
European Elections 2014: the Populist Challenge[1]
Populist forces on the right and the left are on the rise in almost all Member States of the European Union. It is feared that populist parties could make significant gains at the 2014 European elections, with some polls suggesting they could win up to 25% or even 30% of seats in the next European Parliament. According to a Gallup Poll in the autumn of 2013 only 30% percent of EU citizens have a positive view of the EU compared to 70% 20 years ago. This is a historical low. The ongoing economic and financial crisis and the measures taken to solve it have contributed a great deal to the loss of confidence in the European project. But there are other root causes for the rise of populists throughout the EU. It needs to be asked whether the mainstream and pro-European parties did enough to explain the European project to the citizens and whether they did enough to defend and improve it. Is it still possible to debunk the populist myths and mend the anti-European sentiments before the elections and how? If populist forces will, indeed, take 25-30% and right wing populist parties are able to generate a serious parliamentary caucus, what would be the consequences for European political decision making in the years to come? On the other hand, if populist forces can be contained, the risk is great that the other political parties return to 'business as usual'. Is the European political class able and willing to question itself and its previous approach to Europe?

Summary
Europe wide the European project is held in low esteem. Reasons for this are numerous such as the economic crisis engulfing the European continent and the apparent inability of the European institutions and politicians to explain the importance of the European project. As a result populist forces have gained importance in the EU and are predicted to win a considerable amount of seats in the European Parliament in the next elections.

How did it come to this?
To understand the rise of populist parties it is important to analyse what signal these parties are sending. Generally, populist parties are not anti-democratic but advocate a move away from our current system of representative democracy. The simple existence of these parties is therefore a clear sign that something is wrong with the current system. Consequently, mainstream parties

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[1] The event took place on 19 March 2014. Guest speakers were **Claudia Chwalisz**, Policy Researcher Policy Network, London, **Jan Philipp Albrecht**, Member of European Parliament (Greens/EFA) and **Péter Krekó**, Director of the Political Capital Institute, Budapest. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. The event was held under Chatham House Rule.

need to find ways to address the underlying challenges instead of finding better ways to 'shoot the messenger'.

A common misconception about populist parties is that they will have electoral success simply because of the financial crisis. However, while this may be part of the story, research findings show that the political mainstream has for too long ignored challenges such as e.g. immigration, thereby leaving a political vacuum for these parties to fill. These problems can be traced back as far as the 1980s. Since the advent of globalisation the mainstream political parties have not managed to develop a framework to deal with the challenges that globalisation has brought to the lives of individuals but also to the political system. Looking back at the G8 protests in the 1990s it becomes clear that an underlying frustration with the current political system has been growing for a long time. Back then protests were equally aimed at political decision-making processes at the supranational level that seemed undemocratic and unaccountable.

It is also important to understand that while there are populist parties on the left and on the right, the two sides see the EU in completely opposite ways. The far left sees Europe as an exclusionist, elite club which works against democratic principles, solidarity and human rights. On the complete polar opposite the far-right sees the EU as too open to immigrants, too tolerant and too international. The only common ground both camps share is that they see the EU as a bureaucratic leviathan which only represents the interests of the elite.

Therefore, it is important to make the distinction between right and left wing populists and especially so because the new populist right has managed to rebrand itself as younger, more trendy and more feminine. This can clearly be seen with the Front National in France which has left behind its old image of a xenophobic, anti-Semite, pro-Vichy party and now competes for votes with a new more trendy and young image, which some call 'perfume-fragrant' extremism. It is against this new far-right that new strategies need to be developed as the old strategy of stigmatisation has become ineffective.

Especially on immigration it is high time that the populist myths be debunked instead of ignored. For too long populists have been able to spew myths about immigration that are absolutely contrary to the facts and figures on the ground. Because politicians for so long did not challenge these myths, populists have been able to fuel unjustified fears about immigration, which has given them a huge advantage in the public perception, as they have portrayed themselves as the only ones speaking the 'truth' about immigration.

Finally, it needs to be noted that in many countries the far-right parties have been the most successful at recruiting young activist by creating university clubs and networks, which mainstream parties have failed to do. Because of aging demographics the mainstream parties have focused on pensioners and older people as safer bets for their electorate and ignored the problems faced by the youth. In this vacuum the populist parties have been successful in recruiting young people who feel alienated from the political discourse in which no one seems to pay attention to them.

Where do we go from here?
The biggest danger right now is if the mainstream parties do not hear the wake-up call and continue doing business as usual. First of all, the populist signal needs to be understood and the underlying challenges, which are being politicised by the populist parties, analysed. The populist tide then needs to be stemmed as the anti-European narrative becomes more and more attractive and persuasive for many voters. The problem, therefore, is less acute in the short term but more so in the middle and long term. Indeed, far-right and euro-reject parties are

starting to occupy the mainstream in terms of their narrative. Parties on the far-left and far-right are playing into the growing xenophobic sentiment in the European Member States. As a result mainstream parties are trying to use xenophobic tendencies to gain more votes. It cannot be ignored that the demand for such xenophobic tendencies are on the rise and this demand needs to be targeted in the long run through education about human rights and tolerance.

The rise of Eurosceptic and xenophobic forces, however, also presents a good opportunity for pro-European forces to profile themselves against the backdrop of a common enemy. As the media seem to exaggerate the current threat of far-right and Eurosceptic forces, politicians should pick up on these fears and use them to argue what is at stake in the next European elections. Further, pro-European forces need to channel the EU values of democracy, peace, modernity and human rights to convince voters that a pro-European vote is important. The latest Eurobarometer survey indeed shows that most citizens of the EU want to stay in the Union and that the values that are embodied by the EU are extremely popular. In that context the debate needs to be framed as the positive EU values versus the far-right values of conflict, authoritarianism and discrimination. If these far-right values can be effectively attacked by the pro-European parties, it would help to mobilise voters to turn up for the elections.
Ideally, the populist rise will be used to further develop a European identity of the political process and stronger recognition of and by the citizens of the EU's political processes and institutions and the value of finding compromises above the common sense of national policies. We therefore need to focus on rejecting the populist solutions more fervently while critically tackling the underlying challenges that do exist. Consequently, a big danger lies in accepting the legitimacy of the populist discourse and thereby shifting the discourse towards one carried out on the back of minorities and advocating discriminatory policies. Lessons need to be learned from the US where the recognition of the Tea Party led to a strong shift in the political discourse because political parties were not able to develop strategies to fill the political vacuum created by globalisation. The recognition then strengthened the populist movement by legitimising their ideas and it will be very difficult to get their ideas out of the popular discourse again.

Populist leaders should also be judged more harshly for their ideas. While these parties have managed to clean up their public act and rehabilitated their public opinion, the underlying ideas of these parties need to be objected to in the strongest terms. It is therefore disappointing that few European political leaders are openly rebuking the populists' ideas that are not acceptable in a democratic society. In that sense it would be positive to see the European Commission Presidency candidates argue for a future of the EU which faces the challenges of globalisation and digitalisation, creates a real perspective for structural reforms and lays out a clear vision of where Europe needs to go in the future, instead of abandoning their federalist ideals in favour of recognising Eurosceptic ideas of reducing the EU to an unimportant actor, in a world which needs more global rather than nationalist thinking. In short mainstream parties need to stop advocating simple answers for complex challenges and start developing sophisticated policies to counter populist arguments by talking to the citizens and understanding the legitimate concerns they have.

To fight the populist right-wing agenda it is necessary to have good democratic debate. For too long politicians have tried stigmatising or ignoring the right-wing populists which has been counterproductive. Indeed, many far-right politicians have gained strength from the dichotomy that they are the 'taboo breakers' and 'truth tellers' in contrast to the politically correct 'liars' and corrupt elite politicians who want to sweep some topics in the political discourse under the rug. It is therefore necessary to stop ignoring these populists and start attacking their often weak and easy to dismantle arguments.

Populism is something pro-Europeans can also use to their advantage. Right now Eurosceptic populist are simply more persuasive. Take for instance Nigel Farage who is ideologically, passionately and emotionally anti-European but is not challenged by a pro-European politician of the same calibre who can passionately advocate closer integration and the benefits of the EU. Therefore, the pro-European narrative needs to become less about technocratic ideas and more about vales, emotions and ideology. For many citizens Europe has become so natural that they do not realise the advantages they enjoy from it. As a result, the freedoms that we enjoy throughout the EU should be highlighted by politicians to show the importance of the political union. If no leader can show this courage, it will also become necessary to look at the way political parties currently recruit their members and why no strong pro-European leader can emerge.

Post-election scenarios
A huge breakthrough of far-right parties is not to be expected. While these parties will gain seats it is unlikely their numbers will be significant enough to disrupt the work of the Parliament. Populist but less extreme parties of the ECR and the far left are likely to gain in prominence but generally do not stand against the core values of the EU. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the far-right parties will manage to form a political group in the Parliament as ideas and ideologies differ significantly among them. In fact, the repercussions of a strong vote for populist parties might be felt more strongly in the Member States than at the European level, as the underlying causes of the populist vote will need to be dealt with on the national level.

Nevertheless, the stronger the populists become in the European Parliament, the fewer politicians there will be with which to work together to find positive political solutions. Each vote for a populist party will mean a vote lost for a positive political decision-making process as the populists have so far refused to cooperate with anyone on achieving positive change in the EU. Again, looking at the case of the Tea Party in the US it should be clear that a strong populist bloc could have a very negative impact, if they manage to derail any and all political reforms as they have done in the US.

Turnout will also be an indicator of what the populist rise really means. If more young people turn up for this election it could be a sign that populists have played their game well and been able to recruit more young people for their radical ideas. A higher turnout could then actually less be a sign of increasing legitimacy for the European Parliament but rather a sign of the current European crisis and a protest vote of many people feeling disconnected from the political elite.

A danger also lies in the pro-Russian stance being channelled into European politics by many of the far-right parties. In fact, most far-right parties are advocates of Putin and his policies. So much so that Russia even invited far-right parties to be election observers in the Crimean Referendum in Ukraine. The risk, therefore, lies in these far-right parties forming a pro-Russian political group at the European level and undermining Europe's neighbourhood policy.
Positively it should be noted, however, that these European elections will be the first to truly be about the European project, while previous elections mainly focused on national issues. Possibly, this interest in the EU will be the wake-up call the mainstream parties need and finally give more respect to the European Parliament and the European decision-making process. Even if only that can be achieved we would be on track to improve the standing of the European project and hopefully finally engage and defeat the populist movement.