

# Time to Act – the Obligation of the European Mainstream to Respond to the Rise of Populism

**By Julian Rappold**

The European Union (EU) is going through the worst economic and political crisis of its history. At the same time populism is rising and has spread across the continent like a virus: The rapidly growing support for the Front National in France, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain, the Danish People's Party in Denmark or the Finns Party (formerly 'True Finns') in Finland – to name just a few – demonstrates the fundamental challenges that mainstream political parties have to face on the local, national and European level when confronted with populism.

Even though populist parties are not a new phenomenon, the results of the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections underline that their success has reached a new dimension. Having accumulated around one fourth of the total votes, protest parties and anti-establishment candidates have reached a critical mass which will enable them to directly and indirectly influence the national and European political discourse. They are very likely to become an integral part of our political landscape.

This way, 2015 will be a decisive year for European mainstream parties. They will have to face major electoral showdowns with populist parties which are already impatiently gathering in the waiting rooms to power in Poland, Denmark and Spain. The outcomes of these elections will not only be the latest update on the degree of public discontent and lack of trust in the performance and responsiveness of the respective national political elites and the European Union. They will also define the direction of the EU's institutional development and its strategies to overcome the current economic and political crisis.

In this essay, I will try to shed some light on the following questions. Firstly, as there is much confusion about the terminology used for populist parties, what is it exactly that populism stands for? What are the root causes and underlying driving forces that have contributed to the rise of populism? What is the long-term impact of populism on the political discourse and on the decision making on both the national and European level? Will support for populist parties vanish as soon as economic growth will pick up? What strategies and actions can counter populist demagoguery and what is necessary to rebuild trust in the national and European political system(s) and restore their legitimacy in the eyes of European citizens?

## **Us vs. them – deconstructing populism**

The term 'populism' is not new to the European debate. It has often been used to brand new political initiatives outside the political mainstream. At least since the late 1970s, populist parties have been part of the European party landscape. Some of them only had a short life span or have just recently entered the political arena; others could establish themselves permanently as a relevant political alternative to mainstream parties.

As diverse as the shelf life of these political movements and parties is the variety of their motivations, tactics and rhetoric, which has led to much confusion about – but also to some extent – to a dilution of the term populism. This is well reflected in the debate on the outcome of the 2014 EP elections which saw a highly fragmented group of populist parties on both edges of the party landscape entering the EP. Parties as different from one another as France's Front National, Italy's Lega Nord, Britain's UKIP, Hungary's Jobbik or Austria's FPÖ

on the right side of the political spectrum as well as Greece's Syriza or Spain's Podemos on the left are all referred to as populists in the public discourse.

What may help to define populism is to boil down the term to its very substance, thus identifying certain constants that steadily recur when examining populist discourse. At the core of populism lies the assumption that the people have to be considered as the only legitimising source from which all power necessarily is derived.<sup>1</sup> Populism attempts to portray itself as the real advocate of the 'pure, honest, and ordinary people' defined either in terms of nation or other social criteria.<sup>2</sup> It aspires to enforce the people's alleged popular will against other antagonist groups, primarily the 'corrupt, distant elite' or 'political class' and its political institutions. The latter are held responsible for undermining and ignoring this will, as well as abusing their power for their own benefit. This way populism challenges the status quo of the existing political system.

However, these key propositions cannot hide the fact that such an ideological framework remains very simplistic and malleable.<sup>3</sup> The programmatic content of populism adapts to the respective context and political orientation and can be made compatible with other more complex ideologies. To put it differently: the concrete character of populism depends strongly on the emphasis of the role of the people, the degree of criticism of the political elite and the willingness to change the established political system. Thus, despite fundamental differences, similar elements can be found in both right-wing and left-wing populist ideologies such as the rejection of the political elites and of the existing political institutions as well as opposition to at least some elements of the EU and to economic globalisation. However, in this essay I will mainly refer to right-wing populism as it poses the biggest threat to Europe's open society, given its exclusionary, nationalist and xenophobic character.

This adaptability explains why the term populism also often refers to a specific style of political communication and mobilisation. Populism is used by politicians or parties as a strategy of pretending to understand the worries of 'ordinary people' and provides very simple answers to actually complex societal and economic challenges. Even mainstream politicians do not shy away from flavouring their rhetoric with populist elements. Particularly in election campaigns politicians tend to apply populist rhetoric in order to appeal to the widest possible section of the electorate.<sup>4</sup>

In general, however, populism as rhetorical element is most dominantly visible in the discourse of protest parties at both edges of the political landscape. The tactic of populist parties is to play with people's fear by amplifying scare scenarios. Populist parties directly link societal and economic grievances with the rejection of the 'far-away political establishment' and the prevalent political institutions which they consider to be either not responsive or irresponsible. More specifically, right-wing populists extend this 'us' against 'them' rhetoric by excluding cultural outsiders, ethnic and religious minorities, foreigners as well as immigrants which they often use as a political scapegoat or bogeyman.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, they fuel latent prejudices and real concerns among their potential voters.

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<sup>1</sup> see Yves Surel, The European Union and the Challenges of Populism, Policy Brief no. 27, Notre Europe, June 2011, online < [http://www.institutdelors.eu/media/bref27\\_ysurel\\_en.pdf?pdf=ok](http://www.institutdelors.eu/media/bref27_ysurel_en.pdf?pdf=ok) > [15 May 2015]

<sup>2</sup> see Karsten Grabow & Florian Hartleb, Europe - No, Thanks? Study on the Rise of Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe, Centre for European Policy Studies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014, online < [http://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/kas\\_36200-544-2-30.pdf](http://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/kas_36200-544-2-30.pdf) > [15 May 2015].

<sup>3</sup> see Yves Surel, The European Union and the Challenges of Populism.

<sup>4</sup> see Yves Surel, The European Union and the Challenges of Populism.

<sup>5</sup> see Karsten Grabow & Florian Hartleb, Europe - No, Thanks? Study on the Rise of Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe.

## Understanding the root causes of populism

An adequate response to the rise of populist parties in recent years requires a blunt analysis of the root causes that have created a fertile ground for them to emerge and flourish. Why exactly do populist parties attract so many voters these days? In my analysis, I distinguish three main root causes of populism, while being aware that the impact of each of them differs depending on the respective national context.

## Exploiting economic and social insecurity

The first root cause of populism is related to rapid economic changes which trigger a widespread feeling of insecurity and lead to anxiety and fear in parts of society. The European economic and debt crisis has revealed the negative impact of globalisation and the interdependence of global economies which constrain the traditional regulation competences of the nation state and limit its power to mitigate rising social inequality.<sup>6</sup> Social tensions have particularly grown in Europe's crisis-shaken countries Greece, Spain and Portugal<sup>7</sup> as unemployment has reached unprecedented heights and austerity measures cause public unrest. But also in Europe's north, citizens are increasingly wondering whether they can rely on an eroding welfare state to protect them as they age. Europe's promise of prosperity remains unfulfilled for growing numbers of citizens and leaves them disillusioned and more and more sceptical vis-à-vis the European project.

From a European perspective, the political will of citizens in both debtor and creditor countries on how to continue the European crisis management increasingly diverges on central questions that touch upon European solidarity. Populists in northern Europe denounce further financial transfers to the 'profligate' economies of the EU's south. The Finns Party and its leader Timo Soini, for instance, achieved subsequent electoral success in the Finnish parliamentary elections of 2011 and 2015 because they opposed further financial bailouts of Portugal and Greece; whereas in Germany, the newly established Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a party that in the German public debate in the course of the European sovereign debt crisis has focused on securing German economic interests as a major concern, could rapidly gain electoral support.

On the other hand, southern European populists make the EU responsible for the strict austerity course which they consider to be unfair and overly burdensome, and which they blame for massive unemployment and an erosion of the welfare state. In addition, they fuel growing nationalism into the EU by criticizing other EU Member States for their lack of solidarity and financial support. Populist parties in Greece have exploited the growing resentment over the demands being made by the German government. For example, Panos Kammenos, party leader of the Independent Greeks (Anel), coalition-partner of Syriza in the Greek coalition government, described his country as an occupied land under the austerity dictatorship of a Fourth Reich.<sup>8</sup>

## Upholding national identity

The second root cause of populism is closely related to the scale of economic changes. It revolves around the impact on national identities caused by a feeling of insecurity in a volatile environment. Insecurity is not only a product of economic changes. Mainstream parties should not be misled to believe that once economic growth will pick up in Europe support for

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<sup>6</sup> see Heather Grabbe & Nadja Groot, Populism in the European Parliament: What Implications for the Open Society?, *The International Spectator*, Volume 49, Issue 4, 2014, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Among those countries particularly hit by the crisis, Portugal is the only one that has remained largely resistant to populist forces.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, Greek coalition braces for debt showdown as Germany rattles sabre, *The Telegraph*, 26 January 2015, online <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11370960/Greek-coalition-braces-for-debt-showdown-as-Germany-rattles-sabre.html>> [15 May 2015].

populist parties will vanish again. The rising support for populism goes far deeper. It is also a product of cultural alienation, the demise of common values in an increasingly individualistic society along with a persistent erosion of the social fabric.<sup>9</sup> The combination of low economic growth, ageing populations, the rise of international terrorism and growing levels of inequality have left Europeans in a state of uncertainty. The pressures on national budgets have put more and more constraints on traditional social institutions that could normally be relied on to deal with rising social inequality. Concerned about their jobs, their pensions, their individual and their families' futures they experience a growing feeling of dislocation.

Populist parties of the extreme right exploit these diffuse anxieties, fears and resentments. For instance, parties like the French Front National, or the Austrian FPÖ have successfully put this into practice for years. They do not offer policy solutions or clear alternatives, but channel frustration, latent prejudices and hopelessness into hostility towards both elites and minorities. More concretely, in adopting a xenophobic rhetoric of defending and protecting national identity and culture, they put the blame on cultural outsiders, ethnic and religious minorities (particularly Muslims and Roma), as well as immigrants. These groups, which right-wing populists accuse of undermining national identity, of exploiting the national welfare state and of not being willing to integrate in the 'host society' serve as a political scapegoat or bogeyman. In Scandinavia, decades-long consensus around the post-war Nordic model of high taxes and generous welfare was long sustained by a homogenous society. But immigration, global competition and fear for jobs have put that ideal of equality based on civic trust under strain. This has provided fertile ground for parties like the Danish People's Party, the Sweden Democrats or the Finnish Finns Party and their xenophobic demagoguery.

Right-wing populist parties link this denunciation of foreigners, immigrants and minorities often very negatively with European integration. The EU's principle of free movement of people as well as the Schengen agreement are often blamed for an excessive influx of undesirable migrants which only intend to take advantage of the welfare system of the host country. One of the right-wing populist parties that has put forward that argument very skilfully is Britain's UKIP. Conflating social change, migration and Euroscepticism, UKIP has been able to significantly influence the British debate on both migration and Britain's future within the EU.<sup>10</sup>

### **Home-made problems: performance and responsiveness of the political system**

The third root cause of populism centres on the performance and responsiveness of the political system and its political elite which has left many citizens disillusioned about and alienated from mainstream politics. To a great deal, mainstream parties themselves have to be blamed for losing their voters and for nourishing the rise of populism. They are often rightly criticized for being detached from the lives of ordinary citizens and for ignoring popular feelings of discontent. In addition, in some European Member States, proneness to vested interests (in particular corporate interests) to the detriment of the average citizen, widespread clientelism or rampant corruption have severely damaged the link between citizens and their political representatives. The case of Greece serves as a striking example. The Greek sovereign debt crisis has led to an erosion of the party cartel of the country's socialist PASOK and the conservative Nea Demokratia, which have dominated the landscape of political parties for over thirty years, establishing corrupt and clientelistic structures in the process.

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<sup>9</sup> see Henning Meyer and Ulrich Storck, The Three Drivers of European Populism, Social Europe, 27 March 2015, online <<http://www.socialeurope.eu/2015/03/european-populism/>> [15 May 2015].

<sup>10</sup> see Mark Leonard, The British Problem and What it Means For Europe, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015, online <[http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR\\_128\\_BREXIT\\_%28March\\_-\\_final%29.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_128_BREXIT_%28March_-_final%29.pdf)> [15 May 2015].



Moreover, national political decision making has become more and more complex and fragmented as it has moved to the EU institutions, or is dependent on Member State interaction and their power bargaining. This allows national policy makers to shirk responsibility and shift the blame for uncomfortable policy decisions that citizens do not consider a desired outcome to the ‘far-away, technocratic Brussels’. Such blame-shifting is grist to the mill in the eyes of those criticising the EU and its institutions for an alleged democratic deficit and more concretely, for a lack of accountability, transparency and responsiveness. Indeed, right-wing populists claim that the transfer of competences to Brussels is a loss of sovereignty and thus poses a danger to the interests of the people. Therefore, beyond the particularities of each party and the various national contexts, they demand to transfer some, if not all competences back to the nation state or even call for an exit of their respective home country from the EU or the eurozone.

The sovereign debt crisis in several EU Member States and the role of the Troika have added further fuel to the fire: the political implications have reopened the question of the compatibility between national democratic sovereignty and European integration.<sup>11</sup> The technocratic Troika of international lenders that was commissioned to supervise the structural reform process in Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus, was widely rejected in these Member States and criticised for lacking any legitimacy and accountability to the respective national parliaments. In the countries affected, the Troika turned into a symbol of painful austerity with radical budget cuts and economic reforms imposed by its international lenders in exchange for financial aid. In Greece, the lately elected coalition government’s populist, right-wing coalition partner Anel and the radical leftists of Syriza make strange bedfellows. Indeed, this unusual populist alliance is only brought together by a common aversion to the bailout programme and its executive body, the Troika. In the ongoing negotiations with its European lenders, the coalition government has not become tired to emphasise that – unlike the Eurogroup – it was elected by popular vote, and thus is acting on the basis of an explicit mandate to end austerity measures and the Troika’s supervision.

Indeed, more and more European citizens perceive the EU institutions as distant, technocratic, elitist and difficult to understand, reflecting a widening gap between them and the political elites.<sup>12</sup> The post-war ‘permissive consensus’ surrounding the inevitable necessity and silent acceptance of the European integration process has been more and more contested. In the course of the euro crisis, European citizens have increasingly questioned whether they are really represented by its political elites as well as the EU institutions and whether they can participate in a European decision-making process that offers alternative policy options. Mainstream politicians all over Europe have never become tired of publicly communicating that the prevailing approach of the euro crisis management with its core principles conditionality and fiscal consolidation are – as German Chancellor Angela Merkel has frequently explained – without alternative. However, in doing so, European political elites have largely ignored popular feelings of discontent and suffering especially in Europe’s south and have left citizens disillusioned.

### **What is at stake?**

In recent years, populist parties all over Europe have established themselves as relevant political players and achieved considerable electoral success. They have started to increasingly capture the votes of not only conservative but also social-democratic voters as mainstream parties have moved more and more to the centre abandoning the traditional

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<sup>11</sup> see Carlo Bastasin, The agreement with Greece and the challenges ahead, Brookings, 25 February 2015, online <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/02/25-agreement-greece-challenges-ahead-bastasin>> [15 May 2015].

<sup>12</sup> see Heather Grabbe & Stefan Lehne, Emotional Intelligence for EU Democracy, Carnegie Europe, January 2015, online <[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/emotional\\_intelligence\\_eu\\_democ.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/emotional_intelligence_eu_democ.pdf)> [15 May 2015].

left/right divide of the political spectrum. Indeed, both conservative and social-democratic parties have suffered severe electoral losses in favour of populist parties in recent national elections as the examples of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the Dutch Christian Democrats (CDA) or the French Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) on the right, as well as the Greek PASOK or the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) on the left of the political spectrum demonstrate.

In addition, in the past years, populist parties have skilfully recalibrated their rhetoric and policies and have added xenophobic, Eurosceptic, or anti-capitalist elements to their agenda in order to appeal to a broader electorate. Moreover, the painful and unpopular management of the financial and economic crisis has amplified the support for populist parties as it has revealed – along with the resulting social and economic tensions – deeper grievances within society and the lack of responsiveness and performance of the political parties and institutions.

This rise poses a growing challenge to European liberal democracies and its open societies, to mainstream political parties and to the process of European integration itself. There are no quick fixes for this problem. Thus, populist parties are likely to become an integral part of the European political landscape, more strongly influencing directly and indirectly the national and European political discourse.

### **Imitating the original**

In the past years, populist parties' demands have spilled over on mainstream parties and influenced their positions. This is best visible with regard to asylum and migration policy. Pressured by the electoral success of populists all over Europe, mainstream parties take over their exclusionary rhetoric. They increasingly refer to the need to protect wages and restrict labour migration from one EU country to another as well as from outside Europe, and thus give legitimacy to hostility towards migrants and minorities.

In Britain, UKIP has forced David Cameron's conservative government to adopt a tougher stance on immigration after becoming the strongest British party in the 2014 EP elections. Since then, Cameron has frequently referred to fighting 'EU benefit tourism' and demanded the introduction of quotas for intra-EU migration. Even social-democratic governments – though very hesitantly – have abandoned their restraint and gradually started to integrate demands of right-wing populists with regard to immigration or the protection of the welfare state. In Denmark, Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, pressured by the strong polling results of the right-wing Danish People's Party, has heralded the 2015 parliamentary election year with party slogans such as 'if you come to Denmark, you need to work' or 'strict asylum rules and more requirements for immigrants'.

Consequently, it is very likely that in future election campaigns mainstream parties in Europe will increasingly adopt some of the populists' exclusionary demands for their own purposes to reclaim voters. In doing so, mainstream parties poison the national political discourse and choose a strategy that bears multiple risks: they risk losing credibility among their party base as well as voters that perceive that shift as the product of political expediency rather than genuine conviction.<sup>13</sup> Even more, they retroactively legitimate populist positions and bolster unintentionally populist support by increasing the salience of core topics of the populist agenda.

### **Growing Influence on the European level**

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<sup>13</sup> see Matthew Goodwin, Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe, Chatham House, 2011, online < [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/r0911\\_goodwin.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/r0911_goodwin.pdf) > [15 May 2015].

Despite the success of populist parties in the 2014 EP elections, their direct influence on the decision-making process in the European Parliament will remain weak due to their heterogeneity reflected in different parliamentary groups, unstable coalitions and their inability to form one single party group.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, populist parties in Europe will be able to extend their influence – although uncoordinated – within the EP and particularly on the national level.

Within the EP, the increased number of populist MEPs forces the two largest parties, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D), as well as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) to cooperate even closer together in some form of grand coalition. Even though this will avoid a deadlock and will allow the EP to decide on the most pressing issues, it goes to the detriment of dynamism, political choice and transparency as the most crucial deals will be negotiated behind closed doors, between the dominant parties.<sup>15</sup>

The statement by the then socialist Spitzenkandidat Martin Schulz in the race for the position as European Commission President was striking in that regard: 'I don't know what distinguishes us'; Schulz conceded in a televised debate when asked for differences between him and his conservative opponent Jean-Claude Juncker. There is no real controversial and politicised debate with alternative policy options revolving around a left/right divide. The only division in the EP is between a pro-integration majority that promotes further deepening of the EU and an opposition that wants to halt or reverse integration. The current set-up of the EP with a larger number of populist MEPs will reinforce this trend. However, only a more politicised European Parliament in which political groups engage in controversial debates and offer real policy alternatives will attract citizens' interest for European topics and create trust.

Moreover, these developments will also have an effect on the political agenda-setting. Topics with considerable left/right ideological differences such as asylum, migration or minority rights will potentially either fall off the agenda or will be captured by populists trying to break the ranks of the EPP by pulling some of their MEPs further to the right on issues where they share interests.

By experience, populist MEPs largely refrain from engaging in parliamentary processes in the EP or even try to disrupt them. Given the sheer number of populist MEPs in the newly elected European Parliament, this obstructive behaviour could slow down the legislative process particularly in areas which require a wide consensus and make the EP unpredictable and slow-moving. This could go to the detriment of the EP's credibility vis-à-vis the other European institutions.

### **Leverage for national politics via Brussels**

The populist parties' electoral success in the 2014 EP elections, however, has had its most severe repercussions not on the EP but on national governments and the respective domestic arena where populists can best unfold their potential as opposition party. Good results in the EP elections have given populist parties stronger leeway to put pressure on national governments to adopt elements of their populist agenda. As a consequence, it can

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<sup>14</sup> for more detailed information see Yves Bertoncini & Nicole Koenig, Euroscepticism or Europhobia: Voice vs Exit?, Policy Paper 121, Notre Europe, 27 November 2014, online <<http://www.notre-europe.eu/media/euroscepticismoreurophobia-bertoncini-koenig-ne-jdi-nov14.pdf?pdf=ok>> [17 May 2015].

Nicolai von Ondarza, Das neue Machtgefüge im Europäischen Parlament, SWP Aktuell, SWP, July 2014, online <[http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2014A47\\_ktz\\_orz.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2014A47_ktz_orz.pdf)> [17 May 2015].

<sup>15</sup> see Heather Grabbe & Nadja Groot, Populism in the European Parliament: What Implications for the Open Society?

be expected that national governments will increasingly consider populist demands. This could further reduce the appetite for 'more Europe' of some Member States, pursuing a hardened stance on the intergovernmental level in the Council of Ministers and in the European Council, making cooperation among Member States more and more difficult.<sup>16</sup> In addition, stronger representation in the EP as a result of the 2014 EP election allows European populists to exploit much more the financial resources provided by the EP and to build on the greater visibility through media. In doing so, they can reach a much wider audience, thus more strongly influencing the national political and public sphere. This will contribute to the success of populist parties in future national elections. Certainly, 2015 is an important testing ground in that regard, with general elections held in Portugal, Denmark, Poland and Spain.

The rise of populist parties also has an external dimension: One of the main beneficiaries of the rise of populist parties in Europe is currently Russia and its president Vladimir Putin. From the far right to the radical left, populist parties across Europe are being courted by Putin to align with him in his wish for a 'weak and divided Europe' and a crumbling transatlantic alliance. While relations between Moscow and the West remain tense due to the conflict over Ukraine and the Crimea, Europe's right-wing parties show an affinity with Russia and an admiration for Vladimir Putin's authoritarian, anti-liberal, anti-American, homophobic and antifeminist policies. They are increasingly open about their desire to act as an advocate for Moscow in Brussels. The FN, for instance, having received financial support from Moscow has repeatedly described the Ukraine's east and Crimea as Russia's historical cradle, while Syriza has questioned the sanctions regime of EU Member States against Russia. These developments need to be observed carefully, as a growing bond between European populist parties and Moscow could be first seeds of discord that threatens the cohesion of the whole European Union.

### **How to react? Remedies against populism in Europe**

The rise of populist parties does not come as a surprise. However, the absence of resistance and the weak response of mainstream parties have been unexpected. One would have expected that this 'populist moment' and the resulting challenges to Europe's liberal democracies, its open societies and to the process of European integration itself would have caused greater concern and active counter-action among European mainstream parties.

So far, policy makers in European capitals have responded either by establishing a 'cordon sanitaire' isolating populist parties from the political process or by adopting populists' demands to reclaim voters. Instead of addressing public discontent and defending democracy and its institutions, they continue largely with business as usual as illustrated in the current management of the European economic and sovereign debt crisis.<sup>17</sup> This way they cede the field to the populists and make it easy for them to influence the debate on immigration, welfare reform, European integration and other issues. European populism has already caused damage and threatens to accelerate the fragmentation of the EU. A strong and decisive response needs to be twofold; first related to the concrete policy substance and second to the communication of these policies and to the way citizens are able to actively participate in the political process.

### **Deliver on European citizens' key concerns**

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<sup>16</sup> see Daniela Kietz & Nicolai von Ondarza, Euroscptics in the European Parliament – Isolated and Divided in Brussels but Driving National Debates, SWP Comments 13, SWP, February 2014, online [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C13\\_ktz\\_orz.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C13_ktz_orz.pdf) [15 May 2015].

<sup>17</sup> see Rene Cuperus, Europe's Populist Pandora's Box, Social Europe, 10 March 2015, online, <<http://www.socialeurope.eu/2015/03/populist/>> [15 May 2015]



The most effective way to win back citizens' support is to develop concrete policies which directly address their worries and anxieties and refute the populists' empty promises. Thereby, mainstream parties should rediscover politics, too: disagreement, polarised debate and competition of ideas are desperately needed as a means for offering citizens real alternatives to the uniform 'no-alternative' policy on the one hand and the populists' simplistic messages on the other. New structures and instruments should be considered to help thinking outside the box and to assess these political programmes against best practices and experiences in other countries. As a consequence, mainstream parties on the national and European level will be better able to provide policy alternatives for their citizens. They will be able to develop concrete measures to deliver more security, better living standards and social inclusion, thus directly addressing pressing issues such as unemployment, lack of prospects, social inequality and little or no education. In doing so, mainstream parties demonstrate, how honest and engaged they are in responding to citizens' concerns and that they can react quickly to societal and economic changes. Even more, they generate enough ammunition to confront the arguments of populist parties, and thus reveal that their simplistic messages do not offer constructive and viable policy solutions. In particular, mainstream parties should openly pressure populists to take an unequivocal stand on issues where their party program remains very vague and offers no or just weak policy responses, in particular in the field of economic policy.

On the European level, Member States and the EU institutions must mobilise more political capital to implement concrete actions and projects that demonstrate that the EU has a positive impact on the daily life of its citizens. Here, the impact of the realisation of the Digital Single Market and the Energy Union are well suited to contribute to restore trust and make citizens more aware again why they have signed up to the European project. Moreover, a more active and ambitious implementation of the European Youth Guarantee on the national level as well as an improvement of the conditions for intra-EU labour mobility could help to mitigate the social and economic crisis as a result of the economic and debt crisis particularly in Europe's south.

### **Citizen-centred modes of communication and involvement**

Second, mainstream parties must recalibrate their communication strategy: Ignoring populist parties in a strategy of exclusion or hesitantly adopting some of their policy demands in a pick-and-choose fashion have not proved to be successful. Thus, mainstream parties must actively seek confrontation with populist parties and directly attack their empty propaganda. The public needs to hear counter arguments and alternative solutions to populists' simple solutions. The more they involve populists in content-driven debates, the more the latter's anti-attitude, their empty rhetoric, their policy inconsistencies as well as the absence of constructive solutions will be unveiled to citizens.

Mainstream parties' biggest asset is their capacity to offer solutions to the grievances of their citizens. Yet, the political transmission mechanism between them and the public has increasingly failed to deliver. They have to establish better ways to identify areas of policy that are causing dissatisfaction or concern among the public. In addition, they must strengthen the participation in the political decision-making process and – even though very time-consuming and sometimes complex to understand – invest much more time and energy in communicating honestly to their citizens the advantages and disadvantages of their policies as well as their political vision.

One way to do so is by rediscovering the engagement on the local and regional level. This will allow mainstream parties to better grasp what really causes the mistrust of political elites, and the dissatisfaction with political institutions. Unless mainstream parties do not develop

the capacity to be convincing and credible at these levels by signalling that they have real knowledge of the living conditions of people and by opening up to their concerns, they will have a hard time to compete with populists' simple and attractive messages. Therefore, on the local and regional level, mainstream parties should establish inclusive spaces for discussions and stronger face-to-face interaction with citizens, civil society organisations as well as companies and other local stakeholders. These arenas will allow mainstream parties to receive instant feedback for their policy proposals and to provide more transparency with regard to the impact of their policies. In the discussions, they should focus particularly on involving the disgruntled part of society as those groups are the key target of populist rhetoric. In order to rebuild trust, it will be helpful that they propose only concrete and feasible steps that can create a sense of achievement rather than foster disillusionment.

Another way to improve citizen participation is by upgrading the role of social media and other internet-based technological platforms, which would allow mainstream parties and political institutions to include a wider audience in the political process and directly connect with citizens, particularly with traditionally marginalised groups such as youth and minorities. Even though translating complex political issues into more digestible messages for easier online exchange bears the risk of oversimplification, it can help to make the political process more transparent. A step in the right direction was the live webcast of the parliamentary hearings of the candidates of the European Commission following the 2014 EP elections. Another benefit resulting from the engagement via social media and internet-based technology is that citizens and civil society organisations are empowered to contribute to the policy process and thus provide immediate feedback and deliver useful information which might be missed out so far.

For politicians, being present on social media platforms is vital. However, there is still a discrepancy between efficiently using these platforms as a help to narrow the distance to citizens and establish more direct and interactive communication channels on the one hand, and reluctant and half-hearted attempts by parliamentarians to be 'en vogue' on the other. Mainstream politicians should more actively engage where online debates take place and make sure to incorporate this feedback in offline political action.

Finally, mainstream parties must address the growing Euroscepticism in their communication strategy. As Ivan Krastev rightly points out, 'the problem is not why some groups in our societies support populists, but why the majority of Europeans are not afraid of them'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, particularly on the national, regional and local level, mainstream parties and politicians are obliged to make more forcefully the case for Europe in the public debate. In a credible and understandable manner, they have to better explain the achievements of the European project so far and the daily benefits of European integration that citizens enjoy every day but are not aware of.

## Conclusion

Europe is currently experiencing its 'populist moment'. Populist parties have managed to move from the margins of the political landscape to the mainstream and are very likely to develop in most EU Member States into alternative political forces. It is alarming that European mainstream parties have not yet realised the threat originating from populist parties and the resulting challenges to European liberal democracies, its open societies and to the European project. Even though the different national contexts do not allow a uniform response to populism, continuing with 'business as usual' is not an option. Mainstream parties must push forward a serious counter-strategy based on concrete policy substance, a

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<sup>18</sup> Ivan Krastev, The Crisis of the Exceptional Union, The International Spectator, Volume 49, Issue 4, 2014, p. 49.

better communication of these policies and stronger participatory mechanisms that allow citizens to get actively involved in the political process.

The strong support for populist parties appears as a cracked mirror highlighting the systemic dysfunctions of contemporary Europe. The social repercussions of six years of the ongoing economic and debt crisis have left European citizens demoralised and frustrated. Nevertheless, the rising support for populism goes far deeper. The European crisis management has also revealed deeper grievances within society rooting in a deep sense of insecurity and in the lack of responsiveness and performance of the mainstream political parties and the political system.

European populism has already caused considerable damage and there are no quick fixes for these challenges. The impact of populist parties is already visible today in an increasingly poised political discourse on issues like immigration, welfare reform, European integration and others. Mainstream parties should not join the blame-game or cede the field to populists. They have to actively reclaim ownership of the political discourse. If they rediscover the citizens' needs, and invest more time and energy in polarised debate and competition of ideas to offer citizens real alternatives to the uniform 'no-alternative' policy on the one hand and the populists' simplistic messages on the other then they have good chances to fix the wrong-doings of the past.