

Q1 2016



POPULISM REPORT

JANUARY - APRIL 2016

POLICYSOLUTIONS



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



The state of populism in Q1 2016

After a seemingly inexorable rise, the populist surge that has characterised most of Europe in the last years seems to have come to a standstill for now. As compared to the dynamic growth of many populists in 2015, the last few months have been marked by a standstill or even slight decline in the poll figures of many populist parties across the continent. On the whole, the vast majority of populist parties that we track across the EU have seen either no shift in their polling figures since the last quarter of 2015, or have experienced only slight changes within the margin of error for standard polls. Leaving aside some country-level exceptions, for the most part one can assert that populism appears frozen in Europe, neither diminishing substantially nor surging further.

In many EU countries populists had achieved large gains already in the period between the 2004 and 2009 EP elections. Between the 2009 and 2014 EP elections, however, their breakthrough was extremely widespread and massive. As a result of the refugee crisis last year, many populists, especially far-right anti-immigration parties, continued to gain in strength. The Freedom Party in Austria, for example, one of the most established and prominent far-right populist parties in Europe, increased its support from 12.7% to 19.5% between 2009 and 2014, and then, under pressure from the refugee crisis, added another 12.5% in the polls to 32% at the end of 2015. The French Front National, also one of the established far-right forces in Europe, bounced back from near insignificance in 2009 (6.30%) to emerge as the strongest French party in the 2014 EP election with 24.95%, and has continued to grow further in 2015. In the meanwhile, the AfD in Germany, which was originally created in response to widely shared concerns about the Euro crisis, came out of nowhere to win 7.10% in 2014, and has since thrived on the refugee crisis, increasing its support to roughly twice the 2014 result in recent polls. However, after the breakthrough in 2015, the increase of the populist parties' support has halted in the first quarter of 2016.

The most likely explanation for the halt in the growth of populist parties appears to be the current decline in refugee numbers, which had fuelled much of the populist surge last year. The combination of the eastern EU member states' closing of the southeast European migration route, the EU's agreement with Turkey and the colder weather have slowed the previously massive inflow of refugees, which had peaked at about 10,000 a day, to a trickle, ranging from a few hundred to under a hundred a day (given that refugees often arrive without being registered, these are of course estimates). There are many questions as to whether the lower rate of influx will persist, but one can safely assume that the evolution of this particular figure will have an impact on the level of public support experienced by populist parties.

At the same time, it is also possible that in some countries populist parties' support has plateaued, that is they have managed to attract the near maximum level of support of from those voters who would even contemplate voting for parties that are in many cases viewed as extremist. While this potential voter base is of course also dynamic and may expand in the future, arguably the fundamental willingness to vote for extremist parties shifts more slowly than party preferences at any given moment, because the underlying values that need to change tend to be more stable than an individual's choice of party at any given moment. Moreover, absent a long-term dynamic that would fuel such a change (e.g. an increasing or persistently massive refugee stream), these are less likely to change than party preferences, which can fluctuate even in response to everyday events such as corruption scandals or the like.

Most of the EU is unchanged

There is a long list of widely known populist parties whose current polling figures are virtually unchanged compared to the end of 2015: the Finns Party (-0.40%), the Danish People's Party (-0.90%), the Austrian Freedom Party (+1%), Fidesz in Hungary (-1%), UKIP (-1%), the Northern League in Italy (-1.30%), the Slovak National Party (+1.54%), Ataka in Bulgaria (+1.90%), the Czech Communists (-2.30%), the Italian Five Star Movement (-2.60%) and the Hungarian Jobbik (-3.00), among many others, have all seen shifts under three percent, the common standard error in polls.

There are some shifts at the country and regional level, but it is unclear how extensive or persistent these are. Thus the major far-right populists in Denmark, Sweden and Finland have all experienced slight losses as compared to their standing in 2015, but none of these were earth-shattering. At the same time, the far-left made slight gains in Finland and Sweden, but that change was even more subtle.

Key exceptions - gains and losses

All but one of the nine populist parties directly involved in government have lost support, though in most cases their drop was marginal.¹ The Czech ANO party, which appears to have withstood the gravitational pull of government and has increased its support by a significant 3.70%, is also an exception in other regards: as a member of the liberal ALDE group in the European Parliament it is one of the few politically mainstream populists in our sample. It is noteworthy that the biggest drop in the sample - far beyond the level of any sampling error - was that of the Bulgarian governing party GERB, which saw its fortunes decline by 14.40%. As recently as last October, GERB had swept the local elections, winning most major municipalities in a landslide, while its popularity stood at 52%, slightly ahead even of the already impressive EP election victory in 2014 (47%). Though it remains the most popular party with almost 38% of likely voters, it has been rocked by corruption scandals (the Transport Minister, the deputy mayor of Sofia and an MP have resigned over corruption allegations). Concerns about corruption have led Prime Minister Boyko Borissov to remark that "GERB could be removed from power only by GERB itself, and this could happen if officials from the party ignore the anti-corruption call" of the public. Another governing party, the For Fatherland and Freedom party in Latvia, was also among the major losers of the past few months.

Only 8 parties in the 78-party sample have made significant gains exceeding 3% over the last few months. Most of these were smaller parties (except for ANO in the Czech Republic and Podemos in Spain, none had polled over 10% at the end of 2015) and the majority were in smaller member states (three Slovakia, one in each in Lithuania and the Czech Republic). It is also remarkable that among those that have made significant gains since the end of 2015, several were not present at all in the polls then (the Lithuanian Labour Party, and Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia and the We Are Family party in Slovakia) or barely discernible (the Left Front in France).

¹ Given that the Slovak SNS is a very recent addition to the government, we do not count it here. It has made a very slight gain since the end of 2015, but that might also owe to the election factor that we will discuss further below.

There were three larger member states, France, Germany and Spain, which have experienced large shifts in favour of populist parties. In Spain, there appears to have been an “exchange” of voters within the new far-left, that is Podemos likely gobbled up the support of the older far-left party IU. In France, the surge in the support of the far-left probably also owes to the continuing weakness of the governing centre-left Socialist Party.

Movement underneath - elections fuel change

What is remarkable is that populists have made most headway in countries that have recently experienced elections. Five of the eight parties that are significantly stronger currently than they were in the last quarter of 2015 are in countries in which there were elections and campaigns over the last months. As we noted, the example of Podemos seems to be simply one of consolidating the previously divided support of the far left. Even as Podemos has gained voters, in total the far left has weakened in this period, albeit very slightly.

Slovakia was the most spectacular example of the impact of elections, with four rightwing populist parties - two of these far-right - gaining a massive 21% more than they had polled a few months ago. The most stunning of these results was the victory of one of Europe’s most openly fascist parties, Marion Kotleba’s People’s Party Our Slovakia, which received 8%, up from under 2% at the end of 2015.

The Slovakian election was intensely shaped by the refugee crisis, and the centre-left government had emerged as one of the most vociferous critics of the official EU line and in particular Germany’s welcoming stance towards refugees. Prime Minister Robert Fico warned repeatedly of the dangers of Muslim immigration to Europe, but ultimately this appears to have strengthened the far-right rather than his own Smer party. Slovakia may not be indicative of European trends in general, and may well be an outlier, but the rapid surge of far-right and other populist parties might give some pause to those who believe that the populist tide has been halted.

Unlike local, regional and European elections, which are often seen as inconsequential ballots and are thus frequently used by voters to register their frustration or protest, national parliamentary elections often have a tendency to drive voters back from extremist parties to the mainstream. This was not the case in Slovakia, however, where the campaign and the actual election saw increased support for extremists.

The situation was slightly different in Germany, as the EU’s largest member states only had regional elections during this period. AfD, a euro-sceptic party that was originally fairly moderate in many policy areas, has strongly drifted to the right and has mainly sought to occupy the far-right ground on the refugee question. AfD scored massive successes in three regional elections in Germany, performing better than expected in all of them (and expectations were pretty high to begin with). These were of course protest votes to some extent, because, as was pointed out above, regional elections tend to be used as a means of warning the government. Arguably, AfD’s recent rise in the polls since the regional elections also owed to the momentum provided by the unexpected scope of its electoral success. AfD is definitely the most successful populist challenger on the German right in decades, if not the entire post-WWII history of Germany.

Conclusion - No reason to relax

On the whole, the results of populist parties are stagnating. At the same time, that should offer little succour to those who are concerned about populism in general and euro-scepticism in general. First, in several countries populists have stabilised at extremely high levels. In many countries the top or the second parties are populist parties. Even as neither the FPÖ in Austria nor the FN in France, for example, have made large strides in the past few months, the FPÖ's presidential candidate was far ahead of all other candidates in the Austrian elections, and goes into the run-off vote as a heavy favourite, while Marine Le Pen may be slightly lagging behind some potential conservative candidates in presidential polls, but she is still better positioned to win than her father, the FN's founder, previous chairman and longtime leader, ever was. Populists' numbers can go in any direction from here, but in several countries another few percentage points more will result in a political earthquake, which will have a major impact on the EU.

Second, to some extent populists are held at bay by mainstream parties shifting rightward (and in some cases potentially leftward). The Conservative Party's decision to force a referendum on Britain's EU membership is a case in point, and so are the hardline refugee policies in Denmark (which had actually already commenced under social democratic governance). Given the surge of euro-sceptic sentiments, this could in itself have unpredictable and potentially far-reaching consequences for the European project.

Third, if the current stagnation owes primarily to factors such as the reduction in the refugee streams, then a change in these factors (i.e. a growing number of refugees), other catastrophic events, such as major terror attacks, or a massive and prolonged economic crisis - all of which are conceivable developments/events - could boost populists further, which would turn them into the primary governing forces in many countries. With respect to the refugee crisis in particular, the announced resignation of the Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu has shown how fragile the controversial deal with Turkey is, and how easily the EU might once again find itself in a position where it has to somehow manage a huge refugee pressure at its external border.

Foundation for European Progressive Studies

FEPS is the first progressive political foundation established at the European level. Created in 2007 and co-financed by the European Parliament, it aims at establishing an intellectual crossroad between social democracy and the European project. It puts fresh thinking at the core of its action and serves as an instrument for pan-European intellectual and political reflection.

Acting as a platform for ideas, FEPS relies first and foremost on a network of members composed of more than 58 national political foundations and think tanks from all over the EU. The Foundation also closely collaborates with a number of international correspondents and partners in the world that share the ambition to foster research, promote debate and spread the progressive thinking.

www.feps-europe.eu

Policy Solutions

Policy Solutions is a progressive political research institute based in Brussels and Budapest. It is committed to the values of liberal democracy, solidarity, equal opportunity and European integration. Among the pre-eminent areas of its research are the investigation of how the quality of democracy evolves, the analysis of factors driving euro-scepticism and the far-right, and election research.

Policy Solutions considers it important that political research should not be intelligible or of interest to only a narrow professional audience. Therefore, Policy Solutions shares its research results in conferences, seminars and interactive websites with journalists, NGOs, international organisations, members of the diplomatic corps, leading politicians and corporate executives.

www.policysolutions.eu

*Published with the financial support
of the European Parliament.*

**www.feps-europe.eu
www.policysolutions.eu**