FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES

POLITICO SOLUTIONS

POPULISM REPORT

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STATE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE:

SLEEPY SPRING

There were no major shifts in the support of populist parties in recent months. By and large, the populist scene is stagnant, with only a few countries showing significant swings to or from populist parties since the first quarter of 2017. Thus, for the most part the rise of populism is on halt for now, though in most EU countries populist parties have not significantly weakened, either. However, in some key countries – including the EU's three largest member states – we have seen a substantial decline in the support of populist parties. For a general overview, it is also always instructive to juxtapose the most recent short-term trends with data from earlier measurements, to see where the long-term trajectories are headed.

Long-term shifts

For seeing the long-term shifts, we chose the end of 2015, when the refugee crisis was at its height, as a point of comparison. The most important insight is that as compared to the final quarter of 2015 there are only five countries with any increase in the overall support of populist parties, and all of them are "new" EU member states that joined during the post-2000 accession waves. In Cyprus, the change was marginal (+1% for the populists), and in Estonia, Slovenia and Romania it is still limited, though significant,

with 5-8 percentage point increases.1 Slovakia has become the country most obviously transformed by the rise of populists, with far-right populist parties gaining 23 points since the end of 2015. To a significant extent, this change, which benefitted three far-right parties – Kotleba—People's Party Our Slovakia, the Slovak National Party and We are Family – involved a shift away from the ruling social democratic Smer, which also likes to dabble in populist and anti-Muslim rhetoric. But though the change is most conspicuous in Slovakia, in reality much of central and eastern Europe has experienced the same, only somewhat earlier: Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, for example, have all undergone major shifts towards populism, except the process started earlier than in Slovakia and had already consolidated by the time that the party support of Slovakian voters began to reflect the political discourse in the country.

Short-term shifts were especially pronounced in Lithuania, where the surprise victor of the fall 2016 elections, the Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union, has seen its popularity decline by 19 points since taking office, dropping from 37% in the first quarter of 2017 to just 18% in recent polls. The recently elected Bulgarian governing party, GERB, has seen a slight uptick in its support since its March election, climbing from 27% in the first quarter to 33% in the second quarter, in line with its victorious election tally.

With these exceptions, it is fair to say that in the last few months right-wing populism in eastern Europe has been mostly stagnant, even though it has stabilised at an extremely high level of support in many of these countries and remains the dominant political paradigm throughout much of the region.

1 Specifically: Estonia +5, Romania +8 and Slovenia +7.

The latter is most obviously manifest in the fact that several populist parties have made themselves at home in government, and though some shows signs of the normal wear and tear that accompanies the discharge of governmental responsibilities, there is as of yet no indication that the public has become disillusioned with them or that there are widespread worries about the – sometimes obvious – harm that these parties could do to the underlying democratic structure. Populists (mostly rightwing) are the leading governing parties in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Estonia, and they are part of the governing coalitions as minority partners in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Moreover, with the election in the Czech Republic looming, the populist junior partner in the government, the rightwing ANO party, increasingly looks like the probable winner of the election, and some of the major governing parties in the region that are technically non-populist, specifically SMER in Slovakia and the PSD in Romania, also often veer strongly in the populist direction (they also tore into George Soros, for instance, who is the subject of populist ire throughout much of the region).

The good news for the EU is that the shift towards populism in the last year and a half – thus including the last quarter – has been slight at the very best. Most of the negative changes that occurred happened earlier. The bad news, however, is that populism remains the force to beat in the region, and there are no indications that non-populists have made any headway. The most promising, albeit very limited sign is that Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, appears to be moving away from populism, and is increasingly caught up in conflicts with his far-right populist coalition partner SNS. To some extent, this is also an indication of what the major battle-line in the struggle with populism may be: Fico recently made clear that he wishes for Slovakia to remain part of a core Europe, he does not intend to lead his country in

a different direction from the general, pro-European/non-populist western European political trajectory. Sooner or later, several of the eastern European leaders might run into a similar dilemma, and this might lead to a change in the policies of some of the major populist leaders.

Southern Europe torn between leftwing and rightwing populists

The developments in southern Europe are in some respect similar to those in central and eastern Europe, though there are also key differences. The similarity is that there has been a significant rise in the electoral clout of populist parties (since 2015) and that their newfound strength shows little sign of abating, even though it has also not increased lately. The two most important differences are that populism in southern Europe leans more strongly to the left. In the one major exception to the latter observation, Greece, the overall development has been similar to that observed in eastern Europe, however: Syriza is safely ensconced in government and though its support may not be quite as high as it once was, it nevertheless appears to have lastingly supplanted PASOK as the leading party on the left (Syriza has not lost any support during the last quarter, but it has dropped seven points since the end of 2015). That is a crucial development even if Syriza's support is not at its peak for now.

In Italy and Spain, the populist parties have not yet achieved a similar breakthrough as Syriza in Greece, but the chances of them taking over the helm of government in the near future are anything but remote. In both countries, the populist parties' support

in the polls has been essentially frozen for a long time now. But in Spain far-left Podemos has stabilised at a level of 20% support, and thus it is highly unlikely that the left could recapture power without some type of cooperation with the populist party.

Unlike in Spain and Portugal, the Italian populist scene is divided into the far-right and the centrist populist party, the Five Star Movement. The latter is the key player, and it might well emerge as the leading force in the next government, even though its support is also "stuck" at the fairly high mark of 28%. Crucially, populist parties have captured key municipal positions in both countries (both Rome and Madrid are now lead by representatives of populist parties, for example), and if their representatives acquit themselves well at the helm of major cities, then that might pave the way for the continued electoral success of their respective parties. Furthermore, in Italy the refugee crisis has increasingly emerged as one of the most salient issues, and Italian politics and the Italian public, which had initially been relatively relaxed about the issue by European standards, are now gravitating towards a more restrictive approach. This might have given the far-right and other populists a further boost and will likely burden the political efforts of the centre-left. In Spain, the recent terrorist attacks could have a similar impact, though thus far Spanish politics has not been susceptible to the far-right.

Can western Europe stem the populist tide?

The best news for those concerned about the rising tide of populism comes from western Europe, where leading populist forces have taken major hits. In the United Kingdom this is a mixed blessing, to say the least: Support for UKIP, the main proponent of

Brexit, has collapsed under the weight of the party's policy success. Coming off a stunning first place finish in the EP election of 2014, when it won 26.6%, UKIP has been rapidly dropping since the Brexit referendum in June 2016, and now stands at only 5%, falling further from a previous low of 10% in the first quarter of 2017. What gives this positive development an even more bitter taste is the fact that the Conservative Party has hastened the decline of UKIP by shifting decisively to the right on the Brexit issue, thereby practically vacating UKIP's raison d'être. In any case, if Brexit does indeed happen, which is likely even if not certain, then the UK will no longer be a subject of analysis in our EU populism tracker – a manifestation that populism does indeed matter and that its impact is not merely theoretical.

The signs are even more promising in the EU's two largest member states, Germany and France. France just completed an election cycle including the election of a new president and parliament, and both the far-right and the far-left populist forces suffered defeats. In the presidential election, Marine Le Pen performed better than far-right candidates did previously, but her electoral tally was nevertheless far below expectations and she did not even come close to squeezing the newly elected president, Emmanuel Macron. Furthermore, Le Pen's party, the Front national (FN), barely made gains in the parliamentary election, too, and it remains a weak force in national politics. Its 12-point drop in the polls since the first quarter of 2017 was the second-steepest decline of all populist parties in the EU, and its 13% support right now has cut the party that recently aspired to lead France down to size, at least for now.

The same happened to one of Europe's most flamboyant and prominent populist leaders, Geert Wilders, whose party was widely anticipated to became the leading party in the Netherlands in

the national elections held in March. Rather than surging further, however, the Party for Freedom (PVV), dropped six points from its 19% peak at the end of 2016, and though its 13% total in election was sufficient for a second place in the extremely splintered Dutch parliament, it is hardly a politically commanding position for Wilders. Moreover, while PVV's polling has been stable since then, it has not managed to expand its popularity and remains stuck at 13 points.

In Germany, the approaching election (scheduled for September) is also squeezing the fringes. The rightwing populist AfD has lost some support since previous quarter, dropping two points. However, its current 7-8% in recent polls marks a significant decline over its peak values of 13% in early 2016. With the migrant issue losing some of its salience since late 2015/early 2016, the main governing party CDU/CSU has reasserted its dominance in the polls, and the fringes on both the far left and the far right have become less relevant. For the centre-left, the growing public confidence in Angela Merkel's continued stewardship of Germany is not good news, but apparently it has helped in keeping the populists at bay – a particularly impressive achievement with respect to AfD, whose rise once seemed inexorable.

In Austria, a similar phenomenon is playing out as the one observed in Germany and the Netherlands, perhaps even more dramatically: As the national election scheduled for 15 October approaches, support for the FPÖ – which may well be the strongest populist party in western Europe – has dropped significantly. The far-right party has lost a remarkable eight points since the first quarter of 2017, and even though it polling numbers have been solidly over 30% in recent years, a few weeks before the election it stands at only 25%, vying for the second position in parliament rather than the strongest. This development owes primarily to

the sudden rise of the conservative ÖVP and the popularity of its young leader, Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz. Just as in Britain, a decisive move by the conservatives to adopt the populists' positions – in this case concerning refugees and migrants – has been a key ingredient in the success of the mainstream right. Whether this will carry them through the election remains to be seen, but thus far the voters appear to appreciate this strategy. If the current voter alignment persists throughout October, ÖVP, long seen as the weakest of the three major parties in Austria, will emerge as the undisputed winner of the election.

Mixed impressions

The "good news" may be limited, regionally and in other ways, but still: though populist parties have taken hits only in a few countries, these not only include the three largest countries of the European Union, but also almost half of its population. Looking at the decline of overall public support for populists in Germany, France and the UK, this is quite a significant change in Europe. If you add up the number of voters who abandoned UKIP since the 2014 EP election when it stood at 26%; and consider that both FN and AfD lost almost half their support compared to their peak performance, then the result is that well over ten million potential populist voters have returned to the non-populist fold over this period.

Even if the UK ends up leaving the EU, as long as mainstream politics in Germany, France and the rest of western Europe – the net contributors to the EU funds that benefit the increasingly euro-sceptic economies in eastern and southern Europe – manage to marginalise the populist threat in their countries, this might end up creating a populist/non-populist divide within the EU

that will compel more leaders in the regions where populism is spreading to critically reassess their allegiances, as Robert Fico in Slovakia appears to be doing.

Yet it must be pointed out that this is an optimistic scenario, and even as such it already assumes that moving eastern and southern Europe away from populism will be a struggle. A less optimistic outlook might point out that the popularity of German mainstream politics is buoyed by an astonishingly long and stable period of modest but perceptible economic growth, and that this popularity has not been tested under conditions of economic or other social duress, which is likely to occur sooner or later. Similarly, Emmanuel Macron's eventual massive victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections barely plastered over the fact that over 40% of French voters opted for populist candidates in the first round of the presidential elections; that structural problems remain in France which threaten to undermine the success of any president; and that President Macron plans to enact a whole range of policies that will upset large segments of the French electorate and could further boost populists. And, of course, there is the harrowing example of Brexit, the prime illustration what high price – economic and otherwise – societies might have to pay for letting populism succeed, even in a limited way.

The crisis still runs deep, and now that the growth in the support of populists remains low for now, the resultant stagnant scenario is still plenty alarming. Previously it might have seemed that populists rise quickly and will fall just as quickly, and that their success is just a brief interlude. The sustained stagnation observed today suggests that at least some of the players are becoming entrenched with fairly high levels of social support, and that we might have to wait years for their decline - if it will ever come.

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