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Tamás BOROS
Gábor GYÓRI

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FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies

Rue Montoyer 40, 4th floor – 1000 Brussels, Belgium

T: +32 2 234 69 00

Email: info@feps-europe.eu

Website: <http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/>

Twitter @FEPS_Europe



Policy Solutions

Revay utca, 10 – 1065 Budapest, Hungary

Email: info@policysolutions.eu

Website: www.policysolutions.eu

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Responsible editors:

Ernst STETTER, FEPS Secretary General

Tamás BOROS, Co-Director of Policy Solutions

Maria FREITAS, FEPS Policy Advisor

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SPRINGTIME FOR POPULISM

STATE OF POPULISM, Q1 2018

As a result of a series of disappointing electoral performances, populist parties failed to achieve major breakthroughs in 2017. Populist parties weren't exactly weak last year, but inflated expectations made even otherwise impressive results – such as Marine Le Pen's 33.9% in the French presidential election or the Austrian FPÖ's 5.5-point growth to 26% in the parliamentary elections – look relatively unimpressive. The current year appears to shape up differently: Populists achieved a major breakthrough in Italy, and this marked the first populist victory in one of the four largest EU member states. One of Europe's leading populists, Viktor Orbán of Hungary, is also on the threshold of another massive election victory, and his party's strongest challenger, Jobbik, is also a populist force. The regional divide is also deepening, with populists gaining in strength in some areas of central and eastern Europe and in Italy, while their figures are stagnant throughout most of western and northern Europe. This is intensifying political and policy conflicts within the European Union.

Introduction

After a string of sensitive electoral defeats up to fall 2017, populism is on the rise again. Many predictions showed 2017 as the year of the populist breakthrough. The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, for example, had predicted that 2017 would be the “year of rebellion” against mainstream politics.

That was not quite to be, however. Instead, from the early months of the year up to the end of summer 2017, populist parties experienced a series of either unexpected electoral losses or at least disappointing electoral performances. The biggest upset was France, of course, where despite a respectable 35%, Marine Le Pen failed to squeeze Emmanuel Macron, the centrist candidate who also portrayed himself as a political outsider. Although Le Pen almost doubled the previous populist presidential record in France, set by her father who won 17.8% in 2002, the expectation had been of either a victory or at least a close enough result that would make her party, the National Front (FN), the most serious contender in the parliamentary elections that followed a few weeks later. Instead, support for the FN collapsed as compared to Le Pen’s 35%, and its 13.2% in the legislative elections in June were barely enough for 8 seats in the 577-member lower chamber of parliament, the National Assembly. For another few years, the populist breakthrough in France is off the agenda.

The same thing happened in the Netherlands, where Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PVV) was seen as likely to clinch the top spot in the elections (the polls had the party at 19%), but ultimately performed underwhelmingly, while the mainstream parties scored a solid victory. In the British parliamentary elections in June, UKIP was defeated, falling from 12.6% in 2015 (the last election before the Brexit referendum) to a mere 1.8%, with the loss of

its only seat in parliament. In the meanwhile in Bulgaria, the populist governing party GERB defended its position as the strongest formation in parliament, but its position is far weaker than it was before: whereas it was previously more than twice as strong as the largest opposition party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), in the last election it finished only a few points and seats ahead of its main rival. Crucially, GERB's electoral performance of 32.7% in the spring of 2017 was a whopping 16 points lower than its polling figure at the end of 2016.

The German election in September made clear that 2017 was not, after all, going to be the year of populist breakthrough. On the one hand, after establishing itself in all state parliaments in which elections had been held, the new populist party AfD also became the first far-right formation in post-WWII German history to enter the German Bundestag, with an impressive result of 12.6%. Still, that was somewhat below its 16-point peak in the polls and, moreover, in European comparison the AfD remains relatively modest in terms of its electoral strength.

A renewed shift in late 2017 - early 2018?

Truth be told, the story of the failure of the populist breakthrough in early and mid-2017 was more complex than we laid out above. Yes, Le Pen failed, but the populist mood (left and right) in France remains massive. Correspondingly, Macron is under tremendous pressure to prevent a further shift in that direction. The success of the AfD in Germany may be limited for the time being, but it is all the more impressive because it succeeds despite itself: the AfD party is plagued by scandals, intrigues, deep rifts and a motley assortment of undisciplined candidates and local politicians who evince

little appetite for message discipline. The continuation of the grand coalition between conservative CDU/CSU and the centre-left SPD harbours the risk that in the public mind, the opposition will largely come to be defined as anti-system opposition.

In Bulgaria, despite its setback, GERB remains solidly in control, and it has brought the further-right into the government. The Dutch case is in many respects the most clear-cut, but one must also add that the PVV's failure to break through owes significantly to the flaws and failures of its flamboyant leader, Wilders, who is simultaneously too radical to be successful while some reports suggest that he appears to have lost some of the energy he would need to capitalise on the public's increasing openness to populist alternatives. At the same time, with the Forum for Democracy a new far-right movement is rising, and in total, the rightwing populist parties still hold down the support of almost every fifth voters in the Netherlands.

In the meanwhile, in the UK the populist party UKIP was derailed mainly by the adoption of its key anti-EU and anti-immigration platform by the mainstream Conservative Party, and the quiet acquiescence to the former by the main opposition force, the Labour Party led by the EU-sceptic Jeremy Corbyn. UKIP's continued political failure is contingent on the implementation of Brexit by the Conservative Party.

The Austrian election in October marked the zenith of the curious ambivalence that was 2017: the election resulted in a convincing victory for the mainstream conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), but also marked a decisive shift towards the populist right as the ÖVP adopted a hardline position on refugees and became cautiously euro-sceptic. Moreover, its decision to include the far-right populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the government has resulted in curious goings-on at the public media and the law-enforcement

authorities, which appear to be under pressure to move into a more FPÖ-friendly direction. Coupled with the FPÖ's 5.5 percentage point gain since 2013 (from 20.5% to 26%), this is a massive shift in the populist direction, even if the FPÖ ultimately fell far behind its expectation of becoming the leading party in Austria.

The Czech election in the same month was the clearest sign to date that the tide of populism was resurgent again. The populist ANO party led by the billionaire Andrej Babiš (who is being investigated for corruption) won a resounding victory, capturing over three times as many seats as the next largest party, the mainstream conservative (but still euro-sceptic) ODS. Other populist parties performed well, too, making the Czech Republic one of the countries where populists fare best.

But the clearest shift into the populist territory was the Italian election of March 2018. Although its full impact has yet to unfold, its significance is tremendous: this is the first time that populists have won the election in one of the four largest EU member states. Together with Brexit, the balance is now increasingly shifting in the populist direction, especially since even centrist governments remain under massive electoral pressure. In combination with the Hungarian election, which heralds a likely confirmation of populist policies (the strongest contenders are the governing Fidesz-party, the most successful populist party in Europe, which has drifted towards the far-right in recent years, and Jobbik, a formerly far-right party that has sought to temper its public image as a radical party but remains to a significant extent anchored in a subculture that includes a substantial far-right element) this will mark two major populist electoral victories in the first quarter of 2018.

Let's take a look around the various regions of Europe based on current polling figures for a more detailed overview of the general trend.

Central and Eastern Europe

The region that comprises the countries of the former communist bloc has undoubtedly emerged as the focal point of the populist upsurge. It is not only the region in which populists have successfully established themselves in several governments and enjoy continually high support in the polls, but it is also where the social base of populism is by far the broadest. Populists have entrenched themselves in national politics to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine these polities freeing themselves from the massive influence of populist parties any time soon.

After a drop in the polls throughout much of 2017, Law and Justice (PiS), the ruling party in the region's largest country, **Poland**, is once again riding high in public esteem despite its continued assault on the rule of law. Broadly speaking, the constant criticisms of the EU in defence of democratic institutions do not appear to damage the government's public standing. After dropping into the low thirties by mid-year in 2017, the governing party began to climb again and has continued this trend in 2018. PiS' support is around 40% again, which makes the party nearly twice as strong as its most important competitor, the centrist Civic Platform (PO), the former party of the current president of the European Council, Donald Tusk. Just as its populist counterpart in Hungary, Fidesz, PiS' current success shows that controversial anti-democratic measures do not necessarily undermine a populist party's public support. Moreover, unlike Fidesz, which succeeds mainly by scaring the public of migrants, PiS actually delivers economic benefits to the poor, and this appears to be resonating with its rural electoral base.

We briefly alluded to the **Czech** elections before, but it is worthwhile to take a more detailed look at country that is considered to be the most economically advanced in the region (behind much

smaller Slovenia). The ANO party maintains its previous strength in the poll, and it is currently supported by 34% of respondents, virtually the same share of the electorate that voted for ANO in the election last fall. Two things render the Czech situation special. For one, there is the strength of populism throughout most of the party system. The third strongest party in parliament is the Pirate Party, which is not strictly speaking populist but is also certainly not a mainstream political force. The fourth, in the meanwhile, is a recent addition to the Czech party system, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a far-right anti-EU and anti-NATO party, and the fifth is the former communist party, one of the few remaining far-left populist parties in the region. ANO, which would prefer to establish a foothold in respectable mainstream politics, is finding it hard to cobble together a coalition after eschewing the far-right, but thus far its difficulties in forming a coalition government haven't hurt the governing party's standing in the polls.

In what is widely considered one of the most vital tests of the strength of populism, polls show little movement before the **Hungarian** election of 2018. The governing party Fidesz, the strongest populist party in Europe today, appears resurgent before the election, adding 4 points to its support among likely voters, while its chief rival, Jobbik, another rightwing populist party, loses three. On the balance, populism still massively pervades Hungarian politics, but the ebbs and flows in the respective supports of Fidesz and Jobbik imply that there is no major change in the overall support of populists.

The biggest setback for populists in the region is the roughly 5-point drop in the support for GERB, the governing party in **Bulgaria**, which fell from 28% at the end of 2017 to a mere 23% among the electorate in general (rather than likely voters). Barely a year after his re-election, the level of public support for Prime

Minister Boyko Borissov's governing party is almost on par with that of the major opposition party, the Socialist Party. United Patriots, the far-right populist party that is in coalition with Borissov's party, ranks third in the polls, with 5%.

In **Lithuania**, the far-right Order and Justice party increased its support by 3 points, which is a considerable gain, and this marks a massive rise in the support of the party, which stood at merely 4% a year ago, in the first quarter of 2017.

There were no major shifts in the support of populists over the last months in the other countries of the region (Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia).

Southern Europe and the Mediterranean

As we noted in our previous reports, what renders this region special is that generally speaking populism here has had a considerably stronger manifestation on the far left – especially in Spain and Greece – than on the far-right – which is not at all to say that the far-right is altogether absent here. Let us begin our review of the region with the main outlier to the general trend described above, namely Italy. In **Italy**, once home to western Europe's most powerful communist party, the far-left is nearly completely extinct, while the far-right is resurgent after a period of decline. In the Italian election of March, the Lega Nord significantly added to its level of support (which stood at 12% at the end of 2017), and with a tally of 17% it beat out the centre-right Forza Italia (14%) as the leading political force on the right. This marks a crucial shift in Italy, and the trend has become even more pronounced since the election, with the Lega Nord rising and Forza Italia falling further behind.

More importantly, the major winner of the election, the Five Star Movement, is also a populist force par excellence, though unlike the Lega Nord it withstands easy categorisation on the classical left-right continuum. While the party is Eurosceptic and anti-immigration, it is also committed to social justice concerns that characterise the traditional left, and it is also socially liberal on some issues, as evidenced by the party overwhelmingly voting in favour of allowing gay marriage. Five Star's commitment to direct democracy and its rejection of traditional politics may be one of the fiercest challenges to establishment politics to date because it eschews the often-used labels of "far-right" or "far-left" populism. Its 33% haul in the election made the Five Star Movement by far the strongest party in the election, although it was not nearly enough for a majority in parliament.

Without suggesting a neat historical parallel or a sense of excessive alarmism, Italy is edging closer to Weimar-like conditions in the sense that there are no clear political majorities anywhere, and the fringes and non-establishment parties clearly dominate the system. As a political community, Italy is in flux and highly divided as to the way forward. What is clear, however, is that the vast majority of Italians endorse parties that are highly euro-sceptic, which is disconcerting considering the fact that Italy is one of the largest EU member states, a(n economically wobbly) member of the euro community, and was for a long time home to one of the most staunchly pro-European citizenry and political elite. It appears that to a significant extent the failures of the latter have dragged the reputation of the EU down with them, although one must also admit that the failure of the EU to provide persuasive answers to the refugee crisis have added to the public frustration in the country that is one of the main points of entry for refugees into the EU. Just as in several countries of the EU now, the migration issue completely dominated public and political debate in Italy and it was a vital issue in the election.

In **Greece**, Europe's only governing left-populist party, Syriza stagnates in the low 20%, markedly behind the mainstream conservative New Democracy (ND), the resurgent establishment survivor of Greece's political crisis. The strains of governing the economically troubled nation are beginning to show. No major poll has had Syriza ahead of ND since early 2016, but the gap between the two leading parties in Greece has widened from a few points to 13-15 points, a substantial margin for Syriza to close before the next election scheduled in October 2019. At the same time, support for Golden Dawn, one of the most extremist right-wing parties in Europe, has been stagnating at 7% since the end of 2017, and the party's long term trajectory shows a small but perceptible decline, and the same is true for the other, smaller populists in Greece, including the communists (down to 5% from 6% at the end of 2017).

In Spain and Portugal, the situation is unchanged, though one must also point out that the dominant issue in **Spanish** politics right now, Catalan independence, is not conducive to the success of the country's main populist party, the far-left Podemos. Podemos, which primarily focused on social justice issues, is somewhat divided over the Catalonia question, with the party's regional organisation aligning itself with the pro-independence movement, even as the central party – while broadly sympathetic – would prefer to move more cautiously. As long as the Catalan issue continues to predominate in Spanish discourse, polarising the public between pro-independence and an anti-secessionist Spanish nationalist sentiment, Podemos might find it difficult to re-consolidate its footing.

There is no relevant populist party in Malta and there were no recent polls for Cyprus.

Western Europe and the British Isles

In **Germany**, AfD did not improve much over its 12.6% result in the Bundestag election last fall: in the final poll of 2017, it had stood at 12%, and our pollster, Emnid, measured the same figure in March. Still, most pollsters perceive a rising trajectory for AfD – some had it around 14-15%, – and the same is true of the Linke, the far-left party, which increased its share of the vote from 9% to 11%. The continuation of the grand coalition in Germany offers an opportunity for the populist parties to offer themselves as the “real” opposition (though the Greens and the Liberals are also in parliament), and thus far they appear to be profiting from this scenario; the government is off to a rocky start, it seems bereft of dynamism and new impulses, offering little hope that it can recapture the imagination of those who are disillusioned with mainstream politics despite the solid state of the economy. Moreover, in the case of an economic downturn, the lack of new impulses will probably massively increase the numbers of these disillusioned voters.

In **Austria**, the FPÖ is suffering the reverse fate: the popularity of the Austrian conservative chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who heads the coalition government with the FPÖ, has put a dent in FPÖ’s previous high in the polls (it fell to 26% even though it had polled well over 30% before). The Austrian voters’ honeymoon with Kurz continues for the time being and FPÖ suffers: it has fallen from 28% at the end of 2014 to only 22%, a low point since we began tracking in 2015.

Luxembourg is one of the few other countries in the broader region with a pronounced increase in the strength of a populist party, though at 8% The Left has added five points since the end of 2017 and is at a level last experienced two years ago. Since it is the sole populist party in the country, its political impact is still limited, however.

In the **United Kingdom**, the only relevant populist party, UKIP, continues its slide into oblivion – having fallen from Olympic heights as the strongest British party in the EP election of 2014, when every fourth voter backed the anti-EU force, it has fallen from 4% at the end of 2017 to merely 2%, a hair’s breadth away from becoming a rounding error. What we pointed out previously in this context, however, still continues to hold: UKIP has been rendered irrelevant by the Brexit referendum and the Tories’ decision to stand firm by the referendum result. If Brexit were to stall, then UKIP would surge again, splitting the Conservative Party – even under a scenario where ultimately a majority prefers staying in the EU.

In the **Netherlands**, the PVV continues to drop after its disappointing performance in the parliamentary election, it now stands at 10%, down from 12%. While the new populist party, the Forum for Democracy, also lost 2 points since the end of 2017, the combined strength of these two parties speaks to the influence of the far-right in the country, which was sporadically also manifest in the local elections.

There has been no polling for parliamentary elections in **France** in the time investigated, and a presidential poll, which might be used as a proxy for the distribution of party support, won’t be available until April. In **Belgium** and **Ireland** the situation of populist parties is essentially unchanged.

Northern Europe

The situation of all the populist parties in the EU’s northern member states is unchanged. At 17%, the Sweden Democrats are the third largest party in Sweden, though some polls peg them

higher and in second place, edging out the liberal-conservative Moderates. The Left Party has raised its support from 7% to 9%, though for the time being this appears to be part of the standard fluctuation. The situation is similar in Denmark, where the populist People's Party lags barely behind the centre-right Liberals with 18%. At the same time, however, the Danish populist keep performing under the 21% / 2nd place level they had attained in the national election in 2015. In Finland, the True Finns are tied in 4th place – behind the conservatives, social democrats and liberals – with the other populist party, the Left Alliance; both are supported by ca. 9% of the voters.



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Populism Reports

The past few years have seen a surge in the public support of populist, euroskeptical and radical parties throughout almost the entire European Union. In several member states, their popularity matches or even exceeds the level of public support of the centre-left. Even though the centre-left parties, think tanks and researchers are aware of this challenge, there is still more that could be done in this field. There is occasional research on individual populist parties in some member states, but there is no regular overview – updated on a quarterly basis – how the popularity of populist parties changes in the EU Member States, where new parties appear and old ones disappear.

That is the reason why FEPS and Policy Solutions have launched this series of reports, entitled 'Populism Report'.

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