

Populism in the European Parliament: What Implications for the Open Society?

Heather Grabbe and Nadja Groot

The 2014 elections brought a record number of xenophobic populist parties into the European Parliament. They have a strong incentive to be more united and active than in previous terms, and they could use the Parliament to shape voter attitudes, pressure mainstream parties to adopt more xenophobic rhetoric, fragment the mainstream right, and obstruct parliamentary proceedings. The rise of xenophobic populism could affect the open society through the EU's policies and budget if they alter EP debates on issues that split left and right, particularly Roma exclusion, migration and asylum, and EU external policies and development aid.

Keywords: EU, democracy, populism, election, parliament

In May 2014, the European Union (EU) held the first pan-European poll since the euro crisis began. Around one in four Europeans voted for protest parties and anti-establishment candidates. The rise of populism across Europe has brought more extremism of various kinds into the European Parliament (EP). It is changing the tactics of mainstream parties and will influence EU debates about the policies, legislation and funding that nurture open societies.

The many parties that are called populist have different motivations, tactics and rhetoric. Our concern in this article is the politicians who call for the exclusion of marginalised groups in society, such as migrants, ethnic minorities (from Roma to Muslims) and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and criticise the EU policies, laws and funding that protect rights and personal freedoms. We consider what lies behind the rise in support for such parties; how they could affect politics across Europe; how their influence could affect the open society in Europe; and what supporters of the open society could do to limit the effects of xenophobic populism.

Heather Grabbe is Director of the Open Society European Policy Institute in Brussels. Email: heather.grabbe@opensocietyfoundations.org. *Nadja Groot* is Program Coordinator at the Open Society European Policy Institute. Email: nadja.groot@opensocietyfoundations.org. The authors are grateful to Elizabeth Drury for her insightful analysis of the election results and party group formations, and to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

2 H. Grabbe and N. Groot

Populist parties are not new in European politics. In previous decades, xenophobic and anti-EU populist parties tended to gain the votes of only a small proportion of the population and in only some of the EU member states. Now they are gaining electoral ground in most countries, and overtaking mainstream parties in a few. In political discourse at both EU and national levels, the core logic of populist politics – mistrust of elites, cynicism about political institutions and demands for the exclusion of newcomers – is spreading as mainstream parties take it up. Many parties of the centre are leaning much further to the right on immigration. During national election campaigns over the next few years, they may well adopt more extremist exclusionary rhetoric on the grounds of “defending national identity” and “protecting our culture”. Mainstream right and left are talking more about protecting wages and restricting labour migration from one EU country to another, as well as from outside Europe. This raises a major challenge for the new leadership of the EU institutions.

Beyond rhetoric, the more xenophobic populists could attack the infrastructure that protects the most vulnerable marginalised groups, much of which was put in place at European level.¹ Already there is an attack on the whole concept of human rights from many populist groups and talk of withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights in the UK. Other member states are challenging the EU by not complying with fundamental rights principles, such as limits on freedom of expression and association in Hungary and discriminatory collection of personal data from Roma in Italy.

There is much confusion about the definition of populist parties. This article first discusses definitions briefly and then primarily focuses on the impact of xenophobic populist parties. There is increasing overlap between xenophobic and anti-EU populism although the two remain distinct, and we are primarily concerned with the former. Several parties that started as mainly anti-EU (for example, the British UK Independence Party, UKIP) are increasingly using xenophobic rhetoric, including demands for the exclusion of newcomers, such as migrants, as part of their discourse. Conversely, some of the parties that started as openly racist (for example, the French *Front National*, National Front) have moved to blaming the EU and calling for exit from the euro as part of their campaign platforms. These two discourses converge when populists blame the EU for immigration trends and attack its protection of fundamental rights.

35 **Definitions of populism: radical right populist parties and xenophobic populist parties**

In defining xenophobic populist parties, we build on Cas Mudde’s seminal classification of populist radical right parties in Europe, which defines populism as an

¹Butler, *A fundamental rights strategy*.

Populism in the European Parliament 3

ideological feature – not merely a political style – that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’.² Populist ideology puts the ‘general will’ of the people first, even when it clashes with human rights or constitutional safeguards. 5

If this dichotomy between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ is taken as the core of populism, the term covers parties from across the political spectrum, and would include a substantial number of the anti-austerity and anti-bailout parties that entered the new EP on the left end of the hemicycle. However, while parties like the Greek *Syriza* (Coalition of the Radical Left), the Italian *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement), and the Spanish *Podemos* (We can) position themselves as representatives of the people in the struggle against corrupted political system, they are essentially egalitarian parties that do not make xenophobic claims or espouse a nationalist ideology. On the contrary, these parties advocate forms of emancipation in that their party programmes and structures aim to shape ways for excluded citizens to achieve meaningful democratic political participation. We therefore do not include these parties in the analysis presented here. 10 15

Instead, our primary concern is with those parties Mudde groups under the term ‘populist radical right parties’ (PRRPs). Central to PRRPs is the ideology of nativism which “holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group [‘the nation’] and that non-native elements [persons and ideas] are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation state”.³ Nativism combines xenophobic and nationalist ideas, although the grounds for defining non-nativeness may vary across parties. For some parties, the criteria are ethnic, but for others they are national, racial, religious, linguistic or even cultural. Based on this exclusionary vision of society, PRRPs oppose the fundamental values of a liberal democracy, most notably political pluralism and the constitutional protection of minorities. 20 25

Mudde excludes non-nativist, right-wing populists from the PRRP umbrella, mostly because their core ideologies are not nativist (e.g. UKIP), even though they may include far-right factions or at times employ xenophobic or nationalist rhetoric (e.g. the Finnish *Perussuomalaiset*, Finns Party). However, Mudde acknowledges that these parties often are borderline cases.⁴ These parties are generally considered more legitimate political actors than their more radical counterparts. Nonetheless, their rhetoric can be very harmful to the open society by eroding social norms of inclusion and anti-racism in the broader political discourse and influencing the policies proposed by mainstream parties. Because the purpose of this article is to consider the impact on the EU policies, legislation and funding that protect and 30 35

²Mudde, “From conceptualization to classification”.

³Mudde, “From conceptualization to classification”, 19.

⁴C. Mudde, “The far right in the 2014 European elections: of earthquakes, cartels and designer fascists”, *The Washington Post - Monkey Cage*, 30 May 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/30/the-far-right-in-the-2014-european-elections-of-earthquakes-cartels-and-designer-fascists/.

4 H. Grabbe and N. Groot

nurture open societies, we include these borderline cases together with the PRRPs under the term ‘xenophobic populists’.

The outcome of the 2014 European Parliament elections was a fragmented group of xenophobic populists. While some PRRPs lost seats, including the Italian *Lega Nord* (Northern League) and the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Freedom Party), others lost all representation, such as the Bulgarian *Ataka* (Attack) and the British National Party. However, new parties like the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (German National Democratic Party) entered and, taken together, PRRPs gained 15 seats. This resulted in 52 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from ten parties.⁵ To these must be added six borderline cases, either because they have far-right factions (the Finns Party, the Latvian *Nacionālā apvienība Visu Latvijai!*, Latvian National Alliance), advocate the limitation of rights for specific minority communities (the Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* and *Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej*, Law and Justice and the Confederation of Independent Poland – notably in relation to LGBT and gender equality) or use xenophobic discourse to advance other standpoints, including anti-EU claims (the British UKIP and Hungarian *Fidesz*, Hungarian Civic Union). The total number of MEPs in this category amounts to 62, from five countries. Overall, that makes 114 xenophobic populist MEPs (15.2 percent) out of a total of 751.

Why did populists of all kinds do so well in the 2014 elections?

Populists of all kinds did well in both creditor and debtor countries, showing that voters are opting for protest parties even where economic conditions are not so bad. The angry cry from European voters deserves a deeper hearing; the rhetoric of populist leaders is not necessarily the main reason why people voted for them. The easy response for mainstream parties is to hear it as a protest against the EU and migration – and jump on that bandwagon. But recent research shows that there are much deeper trends at work here – economic pain, a disillusionment with politics in general and concern about how representative European democracies really are. Many European voters are sceptical that traditional political institutions do not represent them anymore, including national as well as EU ones. And there is a great sense of insecurity about cultural identity and traditions being eroded right across Europe.⁶

Voters’ economic concerns will not be relieved anytime soon. The euro has stabilised for the moment, but many southern Europeans are wondering if economic

⁵The Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party of Austria), the Belgian *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest), the Danish *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People’s Party), the French National Front, the German *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, the Greek *Chrysi Avgi* (Golden Dawn), the Hungarian *Jobbik* (Movement for a Better Hungary), the Italian *Lega Nord*, the Dutch Freedom Party, and the Swedish *Sverigedemokraterna* (Swedish Democrats).

⁶See Fieschi *et al.*, *Populist fantasies*.

Populism in the European Parliament 5

dynamism and jobs will ever return. Northerners are not feeling the pain so much and may have jobs, but they are wondering if they can rely on the welfare state to protect them as they age. The crisis revealed the dark side of globalisation – that interdependence means permanently greater vulnerability to turbulence elsewhere in the world. Even in wealthy European countries, the state has limited powers to protect citizens from insecurity and rising inequality. The world has changed, undermining the social contracts that Europeans hold dear. Taxes stay high but economic security cannot be assured. And citizens in many countries have the impression that elites serve their own interests rather than the public interest.⁷

Xenophobic populists have tapped into all these fears and resentments. They do not offer policy solutions or clear options, but they channel frustration and hopelessness into hostility towards both elites and minorities. It is much easier to pin the blame on politicians and those on the margins of society – especially Roma, migrants and Muslims – than the faceless forces of the global economy. On economic policy, many of the xenophobic populist parties straddle the old left/right political divide. In her criticism of the euro and economic liberalisation, for example, Front National leader Marine Le Pen sounds remarkably like French far-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. But her anti-migrant and anti-Muslim stances are typical of traditional far-right politics.

What impact will the increased number of xenophobic populist MEPs have?

The new intake of xenophobic populist MEPs arrived in Brussels soon after the European Parliament gained major new powers under the Lisbon Treaty. The EP now has the power to block EU legislation, funding and resolutions, and to put political pressure on governments. The question is whether and how xenophobic populists might use these powers.

Resources and influence in the European Parliament

Despite their increased numbers, most xenophobic populists remain marginalised within the non-attached (NI) section of MEPs and so largely lack direct influence. Having failed to find 25 MEPs from seven member states to join her group,

⁷See, *inter alia*, Edelman, “Edelman Trust Barometer 2012”, 22 January 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/79026497/2012-Edelman-Trust-Barometer-Executive-Summary>; European Commission, “Special Eurobarometer 415: Europeans in 2014”, July 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_415_en.pdf; German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2013*, 2013, <http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2013/09/TTrends-2013-Key-Findings-Report.pdf>; Pew Research Center, “A fragile rebound for EU image on eve European Parliament elections: EU favorability rises, but majorities say their voice is not heard in Brussels”, *Global Attitudes Project*, May 2014, http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2014/05/2014-05-12_Pew-Global-Attitudes-European-Union.pdf.

6 *H. Grabbe and N. Groot*

Marine Le Pen remains, in her own words, a “sous-deputé”⁸ without political influence to set the EP’s agenda and procedures, with less speaking time in plenary debate and limited power to write reports or table plenary amendments.⁹ Geert Wilders has now resigned as an MEP, as he had to choose between taking a seat in the EP or the Dutch parliament; the failure of his and Le Pen’s attempt to create an EP political group may have influenced his decision.

The failure to form a political group leaves xenophobic populist MEPs with an individual funding allowance of around €40,000 each to support their parliamentary activities, whereas as a group they would have had a combined pot of over €3 million (at 2012 values) for about 40 MEPs, double the amount of money per MEP.¹⁰ However, they can continue to negotiate with other MEPs to form a political group later during the parliamentary term. As Parliament moves into the business of the next term, dissatisfied MEPs who are members of the mainstream groups but share more extreme views might be tempted to join a xenophobic populist group. Parties that rejected membership of the Le Pen-Wilders alliance at the start of the term, especially the Swedish Democrats and UKIP, might reconsider their stance if they perform poorly in upcoming national elections.¹¹

Mainstream party groups see this as a success in freezing the xenophobic populists out of most EP business. However, some xenophobic populists have joined party groupings, for example the Danish People’s Party and True Finns in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group. The xenophobic populists that lack the institutional benefits of a political group can still influence EU policies, legislation and funding in at least three ways: by shaping voter attitudes and opinions; pressuring mainstream political parties to take more restrictive stances on open society issues; and obstructing parliamentary proceedings.

Shaping voter attitudes

In the previous terms, xenophobic populist MEPs mainly used the EP as a source of personal funding and a podium from which to broadcast their messages. They made xenophobic and anti-elite speeches in the Parliament and uploaded them to the internet through YouTube or other sites, but most did not get much involved

⁸Fact Check EU, “Marine Le Pen”, 6 May 2014, <https://factcheckeu.org/factchecks/show/487/marine-le-pen>.

⁹See the EP’s Rules of Procedure for the 8th parliamentary term, July 2014, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getLastRules.do?language=EN&reference=TOC>.

¹⁰For the amounts awarded to political parties/foundations in 2012, see European Parliament, “Grants from the European Parliament to political parties at European level per party and per year”, March 2014, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/grants/Grant_amounts_parties_03_2014.pdf.

¹¹C. Mudde. “The Le Pen-Wilders alliance and the European Parliament: Plus ça change, plus la meme chose”, *Washington Post – The Monkey Cage*, 11 February 2014, [p://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/11/the-le-pen-wilders-alliance-and-the-european-parliament-plus-ca-change-plus-cest-la-memeans/Grant_amounts_parties_03_2014.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/11/the-le-pen-wilders-alliance-and-the-european-parliament-plus-ca-change-plus-cest-la-memeans/Grant_amounts_parties_03_2014.pdf).

Populism in the European Parliament 7

in the details of parliamentary decision-making.¹² However, in a political context where inflammatory speeches on YouTube reach a much wider audience than complex European policy debates do, xenophobic discourse erodes the social norms and values that are essential for upholding the principles of the open society. Xenophobic populists are likely to use the base of their increased popular support to try to win the media communications battle on Europe – which could do more political damage than formal votes in the parliament. This will have an impact on societies where anti-racism norms are being eroded.

Pressuring mainstream parties to adopt xenophobic populist rhetoric

Perhaps even more significant than the direct influence of xenophobic populist parties on voter attitudes and opinions is their impact on mainstream political parties. The growing success of xenophobic populists in national politics has given legitimacy to hostility towards migrants, and also other minorities in some countries (for example, anti-LGBTI (LGBT + intersex) people in the eastern member states). Where mainstream parties do not contest these claims, they can change prevalent social norms about what are acceptable claims to make in political debates.

The xenophobic populists are testing the acceptable edge of politics in their societies. For example, in 2009 a video game called “*Rimbalza il clandestino*” (bounce the illegal immigrant) appeared on the Lega Nord’s Facebook page shortly after the capsizing of a boat carrying would-be immigrants off the coast of Italy.¹³ A public outcry caused the party to delete it shortly thereafter. However, other offensive anti-immigration slogans and images have travelled from one party to another. In the 2010 general election campaign, a UKIP leaflet copied a Lega Nord poster showing a man in a Native American feather headdress with the strap-line “He used to ignore immigration ... Now he lives on a reservation.”¹⁴ The European Parliament has at times reacted to sanction xenophobic claims: for example, Marine Le Pen lost her parliamentary immunity after she suggested Muslims occupied the streets of France.¹⁵

Xenophobic populists also influence the public perception of the scale of immigration and social change, portraying migrants as a much higher proportion of the population than official statistics show.¹⁶ When mainstream parties of both right and left fail to rebut such claims or make counter-arguments, they increase the legitimacy of discourse about a supposed need for ‘getting tough’ on migrants and

¹²Morris, *Conflicted politicians*.

¹³M. Pasqua, “Ma sul sito della Lega impazza il gioco ‘Rimbalza il clandestino’”, *La Repubblica*, 21 August 2009, <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/08/sezioni/politica/lega-fiction/lega-videogame/lega-videogame.html>.

¹⁴See UKIP election leaflet, as recorded by Election Leaflets.org, <http://www.electionleaflets.org/leaflets/2189/>.

¹⁵European Parliament, *Report on waiver of immunity*.

¹⁶German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2013*, 38-9.

8 *H. Grabbe and N. Groot*

minorities. This is a dangerous trend because it has a long-term effect on how tolerant the society as a whole becomes. Political leadership (and the lack of it) by mainstream politicians makes a big difference. Extensive empirical research by political psychologists has demonstrated that anti-prejudice norms tend to keep voters away from extremist parties – even when they support the discriminatory policies these parties espouse – but voter support for xenophobic rhetoric and discriminatory policies increases when they are also advocated by mainstream parties.¹⁷

10 If mainstream parties now adopt more extremist exclusionary rhetoric on the grounds of “defending national identity” and “protecting our culture” during national election campaigns over the next few years, the implications for the infrastructure that protects the most vulnerable marginalised groups in Europe – much of which was put in place at EU level – may be serious. Xenophobic populist discourse could make it more acceptable to criticise previously widely accepted norms and principles of anti-discrimination and anti-racism that underpin many EU policies and funding.

15 Some individual member states recently adopted legislation and took measures that do not comply with EU fundamental rights principles: for example, Hungary limited freedom of expression and association and Italy is collecting personal data from Roma using discriminatory methods.¹⁸ At EU level, mainstream right and left are talking more about protecting wages and restricting labour migration from one EU country to another, as well as from outside Europe.¹⁹ If these trends are compounded by more xenophobic discourse in the EP, the illiberal turn in a few European countries could spread to others.

25

Consolidating the big party groupings in the EP but potentially fragmenting the right

Xenophobic populist MEPs had little policy impact in the last parliamentary term. Partly this was the result of tactical disengagement, as they were seeking to show their supporters that they were not part of the political system. But it was also because they disagreed on many issues, from gay marriage to EU policy towards Israel. Most importantly, they had not been elected because they espoused clear

¹⁷Blinder, Ford and Ivarsflaten, “The better angels of our nature”.

¹⁸See European Parliament, *Report on the situation of fundamental rights*; C. Hermanin and S. Kostas, “Italy takes a step towards confronting anti-Roma discrimination”, *Voices*, Open Society European Policy Institute, 28 June 2013, <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/italy-takes-step-towards-confronting-anti-roma-discrimination>.

¹⁹Ghimis, *Immigration and free movement*; V. Naydenova and I. Butler, “A Roma Reality Check for the UK”, *Voices*, Open Society European Policy Institute, 26 March 2014, <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/roma-reality-check-uk>.

Populism in the European Parliament 9

policy goals that would motivate them to organise joint action or to form coalitions with other mainstream parties on particular issues.²⁰

In the current parliamentary term, coalition-building will be difficult, not just for the xenophobic populist MEPs, because the new EP will be more fragmented. It will have the same number of political groups and a similarly fine balance between left and right, but the increased number of xenophobic populist MEPs has left just a small margin of votes between the mainstream parties of the left and right.

In response to the changed political realities, the two largest mainstream groups, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D), have negotiated a "grand coalition political agreement" with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) on key policies for the upcoming EP agenda, starting with election of the Commission president. This was initiated by the EPP group, which can no longer command a centre-right majority with its traditional allies – the European Conservatives and Reformists and ALDE – because of the increased number of xenophobic populist MEPs.

This "grand coalition" might keep a fragile consensus for open society measures to gain EP approval. However, it carries risks for democratic practice in the Parliament, as well as for specific policies where there are left-right ideological differences, such as asylum and migration. A grand coalition could be tempted to take political agreements too far. First signs of this were visible in July, when committees elected their chairpersons and vice-chairpersons. According to Parliament's system for distributing these posts, the UKIP-led Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy grouping (EFDD) was entitled to one committee chairmanship and six vice-chairmanships.²¹ However, votes were cast by secret ballot, and the EPP, S&D and ALDE agreed to block nominees from the EFDD.²² This is an understandable tactic, but closed-door deals like this feed populist arguments that elites are misusing the political system to exclude smaller parties to their own benefit.

There are also risks in policy areas where there are left-right ideological differences, as the small margin of votes between mainstream parties of the left and right restricts the room for political difference in the centrist grand coalition. Xenophobic populists could pull some centre-right MEPs further to the right on issues where they share interests. The ECR and EFDD groups, which include some xenophobic populists in a group with more traditional conservative Eurosceptic parties, could attract the more right-wing members of the EPP to vote with them on issues such as asylum and migration. Individual MEPs from the EPP, EFDD and ECR

²⁰Morris, *Conflicted politicians*.

²¹Although this is not set out anywhere in the Rules of Procedure, an unofficial norm in the European Parliament is that committee chairs and other offices are allocated via the d'Hondt system of proportional representation. See Corbett *et al.*, "The parliamentary committees".

²²Euractiv, "Greens back Farage in row over EU Parliament chairs", 4 July 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/greens-back-farage-row-over-eu-parliament-chairs-303293>.

10 *H. Grabbe and N. Groot*

5 could defect from agreed party lines, especially where there is a conflict between
the policy priorities of their national parties and those of their respective European
party groups. Research has shown that the further MEPs national parties are from
their European party groups, the more likely it is that they will vote against their
grouping.²³ Looking specifically at the European party group that hosted the most
10 xenophobic populist MEPs in the previous parliamentary term – the UKIP-led
Europe for Freedom and Democracy (EFD) – average group voting cohesion rates
demonstrate that it was by far (with a margin of 30.8 percent) the least cohesive of
the seven political groups in parliament. Moreover, the Danish People’s Party and
the Finns Party, which have now moved from the EFDD to the ECR, were in the
15 top 15 national parties most disloyal to their European group (with national party
loyalty to the European group at 63.6 percent and 64.3 percent respectively).²⁴

Obstructing parliamentary proceedings

In addition to making the European Parliament more unpredictable, the larger
numbers of xenophobic populist MEPs will make bolder attempts to challenge the
EU political system and disrupt parliamentary business. If they use speaking time
20 and tabling of questions to disrupt debates and voting, the president of the Parli-
ament will find it increasingly difficult to keep order and maintain momentum
behind proceedings. That will slow down legislation and approval of policies and
funding. They could also bring the whole institution into disrepute if the speeches
of xenophobic populists dominate media coverage of the Parliament.

25 This could also have an impact on relations between the EU institutions. If the
EP becomes more unpredictable and slow-moving, the member states could seek
to do more deals among themselves, outside the EU treaties and the Community
method that involves the EP.

What are the implications for policies that help keep societies open?

30 Given the EP’s position as a co-legislator, xenophobic populist MEPs could
increase opposition to progressive legislation and policies, especially where they
share common ground – for example in opposing migration, asylum, development
aid, and EU standards and policies that protect marginalised groups. They could
criticise EU foreign policies too, including the asylum fund, as well as human
35 rights promotion. Although the xenophobic populists do not have the power to

²³Hix, *Electoral institutions and legislative behavior*, 212-4.

²⁴For national party and European group cohesion rates from 14 July 2009 until 17 April 2014, see “Cohesion of (trans-national) political groups in the European Parliament (from 14 July 2009 – 17 April 2014)”, VoteWatch Europe, <http://term7.votewatch.eu/en/political-group-cohesion.html>. Note that outside of the EFD, most of the other xenophobic populist MEPs were non-attached members and are, therefore, disregarded in the analysis of voting cohesion rates.

Populism in the European Parliament 11

block measures, because of the constellation of party groupings they can influence voters' views and the stance of mainstream parties, as discussed above.

Areas to watch for xenophobic populist influence:

- The EP has hitherto been a stronger supporter of Roma rights and social inclusion than reluctant member states and Commissioners. It has pressed the Commission and national governments to maintain momentum on initiatives for Roma inclusion, in particular the National Roma Integration Strategies. It has also made EU funding available for NGOs to monitor implementation of national strategies, and for programmes to promote equality. Xenophobic populist MEPs could try to stop the EP from supporting such initiatives in the future by pushing centre-right parties into opposing them. 5 10
- Through election observation missions and joint parliamentary committees, MEPs have an influence in other countries beyond their powers in the EU. Populist MEPs have recently used their positions to endorse flawed elections (Azerbaijan²⁵) and to promote the rights of ethnic Hungarians over those of Roma (Serbia). An increase in these MEPs is likely to further undermine the EU's credibility and its leverage in promoting human rights in the rest of the world. Moreover, several prominent populist leaders are openly praising Russian President Vladimir Putin, and some far right parties may have Russian funding.²⁶ These MEPs could influence the EU debate about the extent of sanctions in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. 15 20
- The European Parliament will have to approve the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Although the EU would become more accountable to citizens if it were under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, anti-EU MEPs are likely to claim that this accession gives greater powers to European institutions and favours minorities, and they might seek to hinder it. The ECHR is the responsibility of the Council of Europe rather than the EU, but the two are often conflated in populist and anti-EU discourse. 25 30
- The EP shares responsibility for approving the EU's budget, so xenophobic populist MEPs could try to steer EU funding away from causes such as equality and social inclusion for minority groups.
- Xenophobic populist rhetoric could push the EU debate about policies and instruments on migration even further towards control measures and deterring migration rather than protecting the human rights of refugees (for example, the Return Directive on asylum-seekers and the mandate of the FRONTEX border agency). 35

²⁵European Stability Initiative, *Disgraced*.

²⁶Kreko, *The Russian connection*.

12 *H. Grabbe and N. Groot*

What can supporters of the open society do?

5 The open society needs much more public defence from its many quiet supporters in Europe. Protection of rights, freedoms and diversity can no longer be taken for granted by all Europeans who have enjoyed the last quarter-century of peace and tolerance. Problems are growing that can no longer be dismissed as passing phenomena caused by the economic crisis.

10 There are five areas on which concerned Europeans can focus their efforts to pull energy away from blame and fear into positive action to reform the EU and improve the inclusiveness of European politics:

- 15 (1) **Limit racism in the public debate.** If many more xenophobic populist MEPs start using the European Parliament to broadcast hate speech, the rise in racist rhetoric will also have an impact on broader political discourse. The European Parliament could use its rules of procedure to make it harder for populist parties to use political debate as a medium for hate speech and incitement to violence, if chairs were to object openly to such behaviour during debates.
- 20 (2) **Engage rather than exclude.** So far, mainstream parties have mainly sought to exclude the xenophobic populists from EP debates. It is vital that the public hears counter-arguments to their claims. Active engagement with populism would deliver better results because voters would hear alternative points of view and criticism of xenophobia. Mainstream politicians could also press xenophobic populists harder on their weakest point – economic policy.
- 25 (3) **Connect national and European politics.** In both European and national politics, centrist parties are moving towards extremes, and anti-racism norms are being eroded. Anti-racism and pro-tolerance norms could be bolstered if the EU were to bring the voices of marginalised groups (such as the Roma) into political debates in Brussels more often.
- 30 (4) **Look deeper into how European societies are changing.** Given the mistrust of elites, and dissatisfaction with public institutions and representative democracy, it is vital that political leaders at all levels seek out fresh ideas to revitalise democratic life in their countries and make political institutions of all kinds more accountable to citizens. European citizens' world-views are changing as a result of globalisation and social media, and politicians need to adapt to this new reality.
- 35 (5) **Increase transparency and accountability at EU level.** Some of the anti-EU claims made by xenophobic populists are justified, especially regarding the need for more transparency and accountability in decision-making at EU level. The Lisbon Treaty called for new measures for citizen inclusion and participation in policymaking. However, subsequent initiatives to bring citizens closer to the EU or to ensure more accountability have had limited
- 40
- 45

Populism in the European Parliament 13

success. The European Citizens' Initiative has yet to prove that it makes the EU more accessible. The 2014 elections saw the first use of the *Spitzenkandidaten* exercise, a largely failed attempt to engage citizens in the political groups' choices of candidate for Commission president. In its new term, the legitimacy of the EU will be defined by how seriously political leaders try to improve transparency, participation and accountability, both at EU and national levels, to make European politics more inclusive. 5

Conclusion

If the mainstream parties in the EP use their grand coalition primarily to maintain the *status quo*, citizens will ask why they bothered to vote. There are costs to using exclusion as a political tactic. Instead, political leaders of the centre should focus on reforming the EU. Many politicians now criticise the EU, but not many offer solutions. They should turn their attention to constructive measures now, as a serious reform agenda from pro-Europeans would do much to restore the EU's political legitimacy. 10 15

Political leaders also need to make the benefits of European integration more evident to citizens, for example by making progress on the implementation of fundamental rights. Instead of hiding behind a grand coalition, MEPs should engage more actively in public debates about sensitive issues such as migration and social exclusion. And traditional parties need to get their act together to communicate better through social media, which populist parties tend to use more effectively than mainstream parties do. 20

Political leaders across Europe also need to defend the open society from rising intolerance and nationalism. Empirical research has shown that public views of anti-xenophobia and pro-tolerance norms are strongly influenced by whether the leaders of large political parties uphold them. If mainstream politicians follow the populists rather than leading on long-held liberal principles, they will change fundamentally the views of the public in their countries. 25

One of the greatest benefits of living in the EU is the personal freedoms that allow citizens to express their opinions, and choose lifestyles according to their values, preferences and beliefs. The EU has helped to build an infrastructure of rights and rule of law that protects these benefits and fosters tolerance and diversity. European societies are an extraordinary enabling environment for people to live and let live. To let these gains be eroded by the politics of fear and hate would be a tragedy. 30

References

Blinder, S., R. Ford and E. Ivarsson. "The better angels of our nature: how the anti-prejudice norm affects policy and party preferences in Great Britain and Germany". *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (October 2013): 841–57. 35

14 *H. Grabbe and N. Groot*

- 5 Butler, I. *A fundamental rights strategy for the European Union*, Briefing Paper. Brussels: Open Society European Policy Institute, 30 May 2014.
- Corbett, R., F. Jacobs and M. Shackleton. "The parliamentary committees". In *The European Parliament*, 8th edition. London: John Harper Publishing, 2011.
- European Parliament. *Report on the situation of fundamental rights: standards and practices in Hungary* (pursuant to the European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2012) (2012/2130(INI)), 25
10 June 2013.
- European Parliament. *Report on the request for waiver of the immunity of Marine Le Pen* (2012/2325 (IMM)), 25 June 2013.
- European Stability Initiative. *Disgraced: Azerbaijan and the end of election monitoring as we know it*. Brussels: ESI, 5 November 2013.
- 15 Fieschi, C., M. Morris and L. Caballero, eds. *Populist fantasies: European revolts in context*. London: Counterpoint, 2013.
- Ghimis, A. *Immigration and free movement in an unusual electoral race: what implications for the next political cycle?*, Policy Brief. Brussels: European Policy Centre, 20 May 2014.
- 20 Hix, S. *Electoral institutions and legislative behaviour: explaining voting defection in the European Parliament*, LSE Research Online. London: London School of Economics, 2004.
- Kreko, P. *The Russian connection: the spread of pro-Russian policies on the European far right*. Budapest: Political Capital Institute, 14 March 2014.
- Morris, M. *Conflicted politicians: the radical right in the European Parliament*. London: Counterpoint, 2013.
- 25 Mudde, C. "From conceptualization to classification: which parties?" In *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.