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POPULISM REPORT



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THE POPULIST BREAKTHROUGH

IN EUROPE: EAST / WEST SPLIT

Based on data from the Populism Tracker project gathered by FEPS and Policy Solutions, the trend observed concerning the shifts in support for European populist parties at the end of 2016 continues to hold. There were hardly any major changes in the popularity of non-mainstream parties in the southern and northern European countries. In western Europe, too, significant shifts were limited to a few countries, and mostly they resulted in a decline in demand for populism, especially in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany. The highest level of volatility however was observed in eastern Europe. Several countries in this region saw greater shifts in the popularity of populists than other regions of Europe.

Overall, the position of populist parties continues to be stagnant or slightly declining in the western European EU member states, whereas in the eastern segment of the EU a significant increase in the support of populist parties was observed. According to the most recent Populism Tracker data, the latter applies to Estonia, Poland, and Lithuania. Nevertheless, the data from the first quarter of 2017 also shows that in some of the eastern European member states a significant decline in the popularity of populists – similar to the levels observed in parts of western Europe – is also something new. Yet this applies only to those countries where the popularity of populists was extraordinarily high to begin with, that is where the aggregated support for populists exceeded 50%. This was the case in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. In other words, eastern Europe is no longer characterised by a unidirectional trend of increasing support for populist parties, but support for such parties in the region continues to be more volatile than in the western, southern or northern EU member states.

Southern Europe

In southern Europe, Spain is the only country that experienced a significant shift regarding the popularity of its populist parties. Podemos saw its polling figures declining from 23% to 20% in a span of just three months. The main reason behind this loss of public support was the power struggle in the party leadership, notably the open conflict between party leader Pablo Iglesias and his deputy, Íñigo Errejón, which was in the center of attention of Spanish media. Nevertheless, despite this decrease in support, still every fifth Spanish voter continues to support non-mainstream and anti-establishment parties.

Northern Europe

From northern Europe, only the popularity of Danish People's Party (DPP) has changed significantly. The polling figures of the DPP, which supports the government in parliament but is not part of the coalition, rose from 16% to 19% in the first quarter of 2017, so almost every fifth Danish voter supports them. It means that the recent scandal over misuse of EU funds by the party had no long-term effect on DPP's popularity, and they could retrieve their voters. Nevertheless, the party is facing a new opponent from the right, the libertarian and anti-Islam Nye Borgerlige (The New Right), which has 3-4% of support among Danish voters.

Eastern Europe

In eastern Europe, there has been a palpable drop in the aggregated support of populists in Bulgaria. While in our last survey almost half of Bulgarian voters had supported some populist force, in the early election of March 2017 only slightly more than four out of ten (42%) actually ended up voting for one of these parties. This 7 percentage points drop in the first quarter of 2017 came entirely at the expense of the governing GERB party. Even though it had polled at 40% in December, ultimately GERB won “only” a third of all votes (33%). Nevertheless, the formation led by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov easily won the election with this result, and consequently it remains in power. It has thus basically emerged unscathed from the early election, and in fact it has even increased its share of seats in parliament. The newly-minted electoral alliance called United Patriots, which was created to represent the base of the former Patriotic Front, won 9% of the vote, the same ratio of public support that the predecessor organisation had at the end of 2016.

In Czech Republic, the aggregated support of populist parties has marginally dropped, but at a rate that exceeds the margin of error; these parties are now supported by 51% of voters, instead of 54% from a few months ago. This overall change stems from the shifting support towards three of the country’s populist formations. Support for the Czech communists (KSČM) and the right-wing Party of Free Citizens dropped by 3 points each. In the case of the KSČM, this meant a decline from 15% to 12%, whilst for the right-wing party it basically meant that it has entirely lost electoral support. The governing ANO party, however, managed to increase its level of support by the same percentage that the other two populist formations lost, rising from 30% to 33%, which means it continues to hold on to its leading position in the Czech Republic.

The support of Estonian populists has grown substantially – by a total of seven points – in recent months. In general, four out of ten Estonian voters support non-mainstream political organisations, as compared to a third in December 2016. Both right wing populist parties active in Estonia have managed to expand their support, and this has led to a surge in the overall support of populism in the Baltic country. The Estonian Centre Party has gained three points in the polls and is now supported by a quarter of voters, while the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia has added four points and now stands at 14%.

The populist parties in the most populous country of the central and eastern European region, Poland, have also secured an increase in their aggregated support: as opposed to December 2016, when 43% of voters indicated their support for populist parties, in the most recent polls 48% have expressed such preference. Nevertheless, this slight increase in the total support of populists is the result of several parties marginally increasing their support, by a level of less than 3%. In other words, none of the individual parties in question has managed to substantially boost its position in the polls. In the first quarter of the year, Tusk’s reappointment and the Article 7 procedure was at the top of the Polish political agenda, which allegedly had an impact on Polish voters’ anti-establishment emotions.

Support for populists has suddenly extensively surged in Lithuania. Within a span of barely three months, their joint level of support grew by 13 points. Whereas in the last quarter of 2016 roughly a third of Lithuanian voters expressed a preference for non-mainstream parties, most recently this ratio had surged to almost half (46%). This expansion is unequivocally owed to the boom in the popularity of the agrarian Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union, which won the national elections last fall. The newly created gov-

erning party attained a massive increase in support, and it has expanded its base from 22% to 37%. The party led by the agricultural entrepreneur Ramūnas Karbauskis is another example to show that populist parties are not only capable of retaining their level of support in government, but also can expand it.

In the EU member state where populism has the highest level of support, Hungary, the aggregated base of these parties has declined by four points, but nevertheless their overall level of support continues to be extraordinarily high. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of likely voters sympathise with such parties. The drop in the support of the latter owes mostly to a decline in the popularity of the governing conservative-populist Fidesz party, which lost five points in the span of five months. Still, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's party continues to command the support of almost half the active voting population (48%). The poll numbers of the radical Jobbik party are essentially stagnant: 16% mentioned the party as their top pick.

In Slovakia the aggregated polling results of non-mainstream parties have stagnated. Thus, in the first quarter of 2017 roughly a third of voters supported such political organisations. Of these, only the far-right Slovak National Party experienced a change by an excess of the margin of error in the polls: it saw its result drop from 13% to 10%.

Just as in the preceding countries, there were no major changes in the aggregated support of Slovenian populists, either. Yet in this case, the lack of a net change resulted from the fact that the trends in the changing support of the two populist parties 'cancelled' each other out. On the one hand, the right-wing nationalist Slovenian National Party gained a significant 3% in the polls, whilst on the other the United Left experienced a roughly similar 4-point decline in its polling numbers.

Western Europe

In the United Kingdom, the anti-EU populist party, UKIP, suffered a substantial loss in support. The party's base shrunk by four points over the last quarter, and at this point 10% of Brits would opt for the party that was the driving force behind Brexit. UKIP was unable to reform its internal structure after the resignation of Nigel Farage, which now seems unavoidable, otherwise the party could easily decline into irrelevance, and this tendency is also fuelled by the Tories' hard-Brexit politics.

As France was preparing for the presidential elections, the aggregated support of the mainstream political parties has stagnated. At the end of 2016, 45% of voters had supported populist parties, while in the most recent polls the corresponding figure was 44%. This also implies, however, that populist parties continue to enjoy a relatively high level of support in the EU's second largest member state. The National Front was the only non-mainstream party that experienced a significant – negative – change in its support. The party of Marine Le Pen lost three points in the polls in the first quarter of 2017, mainly due to the revelation that Russians financed the FN's campaign through secret bank loans. The far-left populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon couldn't advance in the polls in the first quarter of the year, his personal support among voters is still between 10% and 15%. By the flop of Fillon's campaign and the rise of Emmanuel Macron and his new party, La République En Marche!, the outcome of the presidential election is absolutely unpredictable one month before the first round.

The national parliamentary election in the Netherlands resulted in a significant decline in the support of non-mainstream parties. At the end of last year, populist parties stood at an aggregated 27% in the polls, but in the March election only 22% ended up voting

for one of the non-traditional parties. This drop is the result of a week performance by the far-right anti-Muslim Party for Freedom. Even though Geert Wilders' party had been supported by 19% of Dutch voters at the end of 2016, in the spring election it only ended up receiving 13% of the votes, a net decline of 6 points.

There has been no discernible shift in the social receptiveness towards non-mainstream parties in Ireland, which meant that roughly a fifth of Irish voters supported populists in the first quarter of 2017. Only one party, Sinn Fein, saw its support change to significant degree. The left wing populist party registered a moderate 3% growth in its support, and as a result in now enjoys the support of exactly 20% of Irish voters.

In Germany the aggregate support of populist parties has declined by more than the standard margin of error. While at the end of last year more than a fifth of voters marginally supported one of the non-mainstream parties, this ratio dropped by five points, to 17%, at the end of the first quarter in 2017. The right wing anti-immigration party AfD lost a quarter of its voters, and as a result it would be the choice of 9% of Germans as opposed to the 12% that supported it at the end of 2016. In the meanwhile, support for the The Left party has dropped from 10% to 8%, and the addition of the two figures resulted in the net total drop mentioned above. This decrease is the effect of Schulz's return to German politics, and his emergence as the most serious challenger of Angela Merkel. Moreover, his proposals concerning social justice and his image of "man of the people" made him very popular among voters who are susceptible to populist rhetoric.



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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 cross-road 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.

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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.

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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'.

- This report is edited by FEPS and Policy Solutions with the financial support of the European Parliament