

The European Union and the Challenge of Extremism and Populism



European **Humanist** Federation

How to protect democracy and the rule of law in Europe?

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While populist and extremist movements have been active in Europe over the last decades, they have recently benefited from a variety of issues which they managed to use to their benefit. The economic and financial crisis, security and immigration issues, unpopular European decisions are generally mixed with issues of national identity to generate simplistic solutions and far-right ideology.

In such context, there is a clear risk that these parties score high in the upcoming European elections. This is a serious challenge for all democratic and progressive organisations in Europe.

According to political scientists, **populism is rather a political attitude, rhetoric or practice than an ideology, a programme or a party.** There can be right-wing and left-wing populism, depending on the emphasis on different issues.

**A political
attitude rather
than an
ideology**

Although populism is difficult to define, it shows several recurrent features:

- it promotes direct democracy, claims a direct link between the government and the people and rejects the established political system;
- it offers immediate and demagogical solutions to people's day to day problems;
- it spreads simplistic and antagonistic images such as the sovereign nation, the "sane" people vs. the "corrupted" and "technocratic" elites;
- it idealises the nation and its perceived traditions, fuelling the criticism of any supranational political system;
- it holds an anti-globalisation discourse aimed at protecting vulnerable people from the consequences of the competitive capitalist market.

The rising influence of extremist populism in Europe

Though left-wing populist movements do exist and can dominate the media agenda, they were rarely able to exchange it for political support. The rise of Syriza, a leftist coalition in Greece, to become the second largest party in Parliament is exceptional.

The radical right meanwhile was often able to capture third or second place in elections, even playing key roles in maintaining governing coalitions as in the case of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands. Parties such as the True Finns Party in Finland, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Golden Dawn in Greece, Ataka in Bulgaria, Freedom Party in Austria, Front National in France, Jobbik in Hungary, UKIP in the United Kingdom, the Northern League and Five Star Movement in Italy all won between 10% and 25% of the vote in various elections, making them credible political forces.

Of course, these parties are different from each other and hold their own political strategy; some of them are designated as traditional extreme right while others are called “neo-populisms”. Some have risen when the economies were growing (in Switzerland or in the Scandinavian countries) while others were founded during economic crises (in France, Greece or Italy).

Despite clear distinctive features, they are part of a similar story emerging across Western and Eastern Europe. All these parties or movements have benefited from the financial and economic crisis and strengthened in a context of disappointment of European citizens towards mainstream political parties and European institutions. All of them call for the “people” to rise up against the “corrupted political establishment” and offer seemingly reasonable solutions to problems created by supranational bodies and globalization. Several of them also glorify national identity and aim at defending the “European civilisation”. The True Finns Party in Finland for instance is against the use of Swedish, whilst Ataka in Bulgaria often rails against the perceived threat from Turkey. In Hungary, the nationalistic trend has been pushed very far by Viktor Orban these past years, as further described below. In Greece, the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn has provided basic amenities for “true” Greek citizens at a time of austerity, while ignoring or even bullying immigrants of the same area with the same needs, artificially creating a divide within Greek society.

Over time, extreme-right populist movements have also renewed themselves and become more “mainstream” and “acceptable” with new ways of organising and strategising. They have softened their image, removed traditional fascist symbols (not for all of them though) and nominated charismatic and sometimes female leaders (in Norway, Denmark and France for instance). They have also proved adept at using social media to influence young people (such as the usage of Facebook to organise English Defence League marches in the UK) contributing to their ability to creating a larger public presence than the number of their actual supporters would suggest. However, despite this apparent modernization, right-wing populist parties have kept the same ideology, espousing policies that would violate basic human rights if put into practice.



Thanks to these strategies and to political opportunism, right-wing populist themes have spread into the public space and pervaded traditionally moderate political discourses in Europe.

THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands have experienced a surge in support for right-wing populism with the rise of the Freedom Party and its media-staged leader Geert Wilders who is well known for his inflammatory language against Islam. If they were once a model of tolerance and pro-integration, the Netherlands have more and more come under the influence of Wilders’ message on the failure of Dutch multiculturalism and against Europe. Though leading a conservative-labour coalition, since 2010 Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s centrist government has

Demagogy and xenophobia

Extreme right parties working on their image

repeatedly requested legal mechanisms to leave various European arrangements (the Schengen Agreement, Eurozone and the EU) and to repatriate EU policy areas to the national level. Part of this was due to the Freedom Party being an unofficial partner of the governing coalition, giving the government its majority in return for policy reference.

**Populist tone
in moderate
parties'
discourses**

FRANCE

After reaching the second round of the 2002 Presidential elections in a surprise performance, the Front National's support has since grown further. Though not in power, their significant support base has allowed them to influence mainstream politics, especially under the charismatic Marine Le Pen, who has softened the image of the party from an extremist fringe organisation to one more in touch with the French public's interests.

During the Presidential campaign of 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy's moderate right-wing party Union for a Popular Movement moved to the right to attract supporters of Marine Le Pen. Sarkozy for instance proposed in February 2012 to hold a national referendum on immigration and social assistance for unemployed people and launched in April 2012 an offensive against the Schengen Agreement in a protest against Greece's difficulties in controlling illegal immigration. Earlier in 2010, his government engaged in a large-scale Roma expulsion programme, as well as launching a debate on "national identity" which had to be abandoned after three months of xenophobic and anti-Muslim discourse, demonstrating both how disillusioned the public was and how appealing to populist sentiments was used by a mainstream party for its own goals.



Beyond this recycling of populism by moderate parties, strong populist and authoritarian driftings have been raising great concerns in Europe.

HUNGARY

Since 2010 elections when the right-wing Fidesz party under Viktor Orbán won a supermajority (262 seats out of 386 in total), Hungary has been veering further and further to the right. It has indeed taken much from Jobbik, a populist movement with strong anti-Semitic and anti-Roma views which is now the third largest party in Parliament.

Since 2010, Viktor Orbán has made some 500 legal changes which affect the parliament, media, judiciary, electoral law, Supreme Court, constitutional court and the data protection authority. This despite strong criticisms from the Council

**Serious
authoritarian
drifting in
Hungary**

of Europe (Venice Commission¹), the United States, the European Parliament² and various human rights groups³.

With the fourth constitutional amendment approved in March 2013, Orbán also restricted the rights of LGBT people with the constitutionalisation of a very conservative definition of the family and criminalized homeless people despite the opposition of the Constitutional Court. Since 2010, Orbán government has also strengthened nationalism and taken up Jobbik's idea of paying tribute to the authoritarian regent and Hitler's ally Miklós Horthy and of granting ethnic Hungarians living abroad the right to vote.

Despite criticism, Orbán continues to attack critics for misunderstanding the Hungarian situation and presenting a biased liberal image, demonstrating again the populist root of Fidesz. Moreover, given Fidesz's massive majority in the 2010 elections and how they maintained their support despite opposition from the left, populist sentiments are undoubtedly on the rise in Hungary and their influence very much entrenched in mainstream politics.

GREECE

Golden Dawn is a small extremist right-wing group that achieved political significance in 2012 Parliamentary elections, winning 21 seats with 6.97% of the popular vote, whereas before they had only won one city council seat in Athens in 2010.

Though not involved in the current coalition government, the fringe party has received extensive media coverage for its strong neo-Nazi stance. There are also many examples of violence and inflammatory language used by the Golden Dawn, even on live television. A Golden Dawn MP in 2012 assaulted two left-wing politicians in a televised debate, whilst a Syriza MP was attacked after a football match, with a Golden Dawn party member commenting that he was not beaten hard enough. Since 2012, the UNHCR, local media, and NGOs have reported an increasing number of racially motivated attacks on immigrants by far-right extremist groups, allegedly including members of the Golden Dawn political party⁴. Recent reports have also highlighted the large numbers of police officers supporting this movement, along with accusations of potential bias and corruption⁵.

Golden Dawn has maintained its support through a campaign of fulfilling the public's needs, such as protection in high-crime rate neighbourhoods as well by providing basic services such as soup kitchens only for "ethnic" Greek citizens.⁶

After the murder of the antifascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas in September 2013, several Golden Dawn members and MPs (including their chief Nikos

A neo-Nazi party in Greek Parliament

¹ [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2013\)012-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2013)012-e)

² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/summary.do?id=1283743&lang=en&t=E>

³ http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/hungary0513_ForUpload.pdf

⁴ <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=463ef21123&id=50595eb75>

⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/senior-greek-police-chiefs-replaced-over-links-to-far-right-golden-dawn-party-8835431.html>

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19084584>

Mihaloliakos) were arrested and the party's criminal actions eventually revealed. Even if there is hope that this party will be dismantled, it unfortunately does not erase its electoral success or the popularity of its ideas.

ITALY

In Italy, the Northern League which promotes a variety of policies, including independence/autonomy for North Italy, as well as stricter immigration controls has received the most publicity for its anti-immigrant rhetoric, an issue becoming increasingly important in the public eye. It entered into government under Prime Minister Berlusconi's tenure as part of his right-wing coalition in 1994, playing a much bigger role in politics. It also played a major role in Berlusconi's forced resignation in 2011, as the Northern League's withdrawal of support was seen by many as the last straw.

The other main populist force in Italy was formed much more recently and has acquired a broader political base than the Northern League's regional foundations. The Five Star Movement was founded in 2009 and promotes a populist agenda, going from the emphasis on direct democracy to 'green' policies and hard anti-immigration proposals. It became the largest party in the Chamber of Deputies in 2013 and led to political blocking by refusing to take part in political negotiations while proposing no credible alternate solutions.

Harmful consequences for the rule of law and democracy

Though often successful in the last decade in increasing their support, radical populist movements are harmful to the health of European democracies. **Beneath their popular public image, their anti-immigration and nationalistic agenda remain a threat to human rights.**

Populist groups have reinforced nationalism and strengthened racism, xenophobia and sometimes homophobia with shameful initiatives like the creation of "hotlines" to record criminal behaviours of illegal migrants in the Netherlands and in Belgium (2012). But the most dramatic examples are in Eastern Europe. In Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria particularly, extreme right-wing militias have been terrorizing Roma minorities and the homosexual community, faced only with general indifference from their respective governments. In Greece, neo-Nazis from "Golden Dawn" have been attacking immigrants, homeless people and LGBT people and intimidating their defenders.

Alongside this spread of racism, **populist discourses have also undermined the quality of the public debate** by proposing poor reasoning and black-and-white arguments to the disillusioned electorate. Using their charisma, their rhetorical skills and new social media (e.g. as Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Beppe Grillo did do), they have oversimplified complex societal issues, divided social groups and proposed complete demagogical solutions. Defenders of democracy have a great role to play here to keep on educating and warning

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**Populist
discourse
undermines
democracy and
public debate**

citizens on damages caused by radical populist movements, especially the simplification of complex issues into ‘us’ vs. ‘them’.

Promoting the EU as a community of democratic values

If right-wing populist parties have benefited from the recent economic and financial crisis, their support is unlikely to lower in a significant way with the recovery of the European economy. They are not just one policy parties as some would suggest. Instead, they are now fully fledged political movements with particularly strong support from the disillusioned young. Strategies to pull them off the political life whether by isolating them or including them in government coalitions have mostly failed.

Populism is here to stay and the risk is high to see a reinforcement of these far-right parties at European elections in 2014, which would make any future action towards political union and reinforcement of human rights in Europe very difficult. This is all the more concerning than the EU has been more and more perceived as inefficient to solve EU citizens’ daily problems, whereas populist parties have been proposing short term and easy demagogical solutions.

Although responsibility to challenge populism lies first with EU Member States, recent developments in Hungary, Romania and Greece have put such challenge on the agenda of European politics. There is an urgent need for the EU to defend itself as a community of values, based on democracy, protection of the minorities and the rule of Law with a global, strong and coordinated action.

So far, the responses of the EU towards the rise and deep-rootedness of populist ideas have been rather limited, partly because of the limits of existing EU mechanisms and partly because of a lack of political will from Member States. Most of the time, EU reactions to populist driftings came through calls for vigilance and moderation like for the French attacks against Roma people (2010 and 2013) or Schengen (2012). In Italy, after the victory of Beppe Grillo and his Five Stars Movement in February 2012, José Manuel Barroso (European Commission President) even reaffirmed his “confidence” in the political stability of the country⁷ when everyone was expressing strong concerns about Italy.

In the case of clear violations of European values like in Hungary, the EU has not been much assertive either. **Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union** which allows for the suspension of membership rights⁸ for states persistently violating basic European values is one of the strongest instruments at the disposal of the EU. But it is considered as “nuclear option” and can be applied after the Council acts by a four-fifths majority of its members in case of a *clear*

Fighting right-wing populism is a collective responsibility

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/president/news/archives/2013/02/20130228_1_en.htm

⁸ Including the voting rights of the representative of the government of that Member State in the Council

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risk of a serious democratic breach and by unanimity in case of *the existence of a serious and persistent democratic breach* by a Member State. So far, Member States have been extremely reluctant to condemn one of them since they fear that sanctions might also be applied against them one day. The EU also has in mind the Austrian precedent of 2000 when Jörg Haider's Freedom Party joined the government and when the diplomatic boycott organized by 14 EU Member-States against Austria had to be rapidly abandoned.

Contrary to Austria, the Hungarian case is not about the accession of a far-right party to the government, but about the authoritarian drifting of a moderate government abusing of its majority to restrict democratic check and balances. The Greek case is also very delicate to deal with at a European level since Golden Dawn was democratically elected and any EU's reaction would be interpreted as "interference into national affairs"⁹.

Therefore, if Article 7 is not used, how should the European institutions step in to shore up democracy within the EU?

There is of course the possibility for EU citizens to turn to national courts and ultimately the European Court of Justice to have their rights protected in case of violations by their national government. But this is highly unlikely that a truly illiberal government would be impressed by Luxembourg rulings. There are also the infringement proceedings launched by the European Commission which aim at protecting EU rules but they are always long and concern rather technical issues instead of human rights' ones¹⁰.

Existing instruments at the disposal of the European institutions are therefore not plainly satisfactory to protect the EU as a community of democratic values. While the EU is particularly keen on assessing the respect of "Copenhagen criteria"¹¹ by candidate countries which include the respect of the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and protection of minorities, it lacks efficient instruments to monitor their respect by Member States.

Alongside this reality which clearly gives room for radical populism to develop, other European measures have contributed to the empowerment of these movements. We think here to the regular EU grants given to European alliances of right-wing parties to help them funding their meetings, campaigns and publications¹² even though the main political groups in the EP requested this funding to stop¹³. Fortunately, discussions have started since September 2012 to adopt new rules that would limit EU funding to European parties that respect fundamental rights and especially the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Article 7 TEU considered as the "nuclear option"

Europe needs new tools to ensure States' compliance with the rule of law

⁹ Human rights laws and democratic principles are indeed the exclusive competence of Member States.

¹⁰ See [infringement procedures country per country](#)

¹¹ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen_en.htm

¹² The Alliance of European National Movements (Jobbik, FN, BNP, National-Democratic Party) and the European Alliance for Freedom (FN, Jobbik, Vlaams Beland, FPÖ) have received EU funding since 2011/ 2012 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/grants/grant_amounts_parties_25-03-2013.pdf

¹³ <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/meps-call-for-funding-of-xenophobic-parties-to-stop/76238.aspx>

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On a more general perspective, EU Member States have fallen short these last years in protecting human and social rights within the EU while focusing very much on economy and austerity cures which have in return paved the way for a reinforcement of extremisms in Europe.

Recommendations

Extremism needs to be challenged to protect citizens' fundamental rights and European democracies. But it needs to be done in a democratic way. Simply refusing to give these parties a platform would be both undemocratic and inefficient. It is a fine line to walk between preventing the damages radical populism may cause and the maintenance of the democratic principle.

There is neither “magical” solution, nor definitive one but this issue needs to be deeply thought at all level of powers, in a transversal and exhaustive way. What is sure is that hateful speeches, populist discourses, xenophobic violence and authoritarian drifting should be addressed collectively at the European level, by all institutions and actors. Europe cannot do everything but has surely a role to play to protect democracy on its soil.

**Towards a
European
comprehensive
strategy**

EHF therefore calls on all European Union institutions to:

- Undertake an in-depth analysis of the causes of populism in Europe, evaluate the existing EU actions and build a comprehensive strategy to tackle populism;
- Monitor whether or not EU Member States continue to respect European values and principles (Article 2 TEU). As requested by the European Parliament and legal experts¹⁴, the EU should create a new mechanism analogous to the Council of Europe's Venice Commission to monitor the respect of the rule of law and fundamental rights by all EU Member States. Following this body's advice, the European Commission should implement “smart sanctions” so as to force the concerned Member States to respect these criteria without disadvantaging the country population;
- Improve coordination with the Council of Europe to strengthen the political pressure on Member States damaging human rights and the rule of law;
- Complete the accession of the EU to the European Convention on Human Rights to strengthen the European system of fundamental rights protection.

¹⁴ <http://euobserver.com/justice/120725> and the opinion of Pr Jan-Werner Muller <http://blog.gmfus.org/author/jwerner-muller/>
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EHF calls more specifically on the Council of the EU and Member States to:

- Effectively implement Article 7 TEU when there is a clear risk of a serious breach and/or a serious and persistent breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2 TEU. This would increase the pressure on the Member State drifting away from democracy and send a strong political signal making the EU more credible in its role of defender of democracy;
- Extend Article 7 so as to allow the expulsion of a Member State which dismantles its democratic institutions;
- Approve without further delay the Directive on Equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation¹⁵, whose adoption has been blocked at the Council since 2008. This Directive would offer EU citizens a minimum standard level of protection against discrimination on all grounds in their access to services (e.g. healthcare, social protection and education) and would complement EU's anti-discrimination legislation;
- Strengthen the fight against hate crime, racist and xenophobic crime and discriminatory attitudes.

The European Commission to:

- Take fully on its responsibility of Guardian of the Treaties and suggest the Council to implement Article 7 TEU when appropriate;
- Adopt a decision to establish the new rule of law mechanism described above;
- Ensure that the transposition of European law related to fundamental rights and non-discrimination is effective and correct in all Member States;
- Reinforce the coordination of national policies which fight against extremist violence and radicalisation;
- Strengthen its efforts on education and training policies, especially on programmes which allow citizens' voluntary mobility (e.g. Erasmus, Leonardo, European civil service) and formation of adults (e.g. Grundtvig);
- Support pedagogical and consciousness-raising programmes and actions aimed at explaining populism to citizens and means to contain it.

¹⁵ [Proposal for a Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation](#)

The European Parliament to:

- Regularly monitor, expose and challenge discriminatory speeches held by MEPs. In order to protect democracy within the EP, a clear line should be drawn between populist discourses which are controversial but legitimate and rhetoric which is discriminatory;
- Abstain from funding European parties holding xenophobic and hateful statements going against the values on which the EU is founded, especially the protection of the rights of the minorities.



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The EHF is recognised as an official partner of the European Union (EU) under the Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). We are therefore regularly invited to meet the Presidents of the Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council to express our views on European policies. We also collaborate with the European External Action Service of issues of common interest.

The EHF also defends its views and values within other international institutions such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).

The EHF collaborates closely with the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

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