

# Populism

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## Populism

### Foreword

This paper is a contribution from the General Secretariat of the Council (Analysis and Research team) to the ESPAS work programme. The aim of the paper is not to present an academic analysis of populism, but rather to offer a political assessment, and to look at the potential implications of the trend of populism for the European institutions.

### Introduction

Through its growing influence in Western democracies, populism has become a significant political phenomenon that seeks to gain influence and ultimately assume political leadership. It is important to understand the mechanisms and dynamics that are contributing to populism, particularly given that a more authoritarian strain of populism is gaining ground.

The Cambridge Dictionary named 'Populism' its 2017 word of the year. It succeeded 'paranoid' and was followed by 'nomophobia' (phobia related to the excessive fear of being separated from one's cell phone), unintentionally making the link between individual anxiety, the fear of new technology and political action which plays on these fears, amongst others.

Populism is of course more than the summation of these different dimensions. Because it is a function of history and culture, it combines many different aspects and is constantly evolving. Defining it is therefore a challenge. Whilst it is possible to identify a number of characteristics shared by most populist movements: an emphasis on popular sovereignty and direct democracy, anti-elitism, anti-pluralism<sup>1</sup>, an exploitation of social divisions and conflicting visions of the world, of inequality, and of an uncertain future, there are also differences. In short, populists come in many shapes and sizes<sup>2</sup>.

For example, although traditionally associated with the political right, populism is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Left wing populism has proved to be resilient, and should not be ignored. In recent decades, populism in varying forms has become more prevalent, and is increasingly determining electoral success across the world.

A clearly shared characteristic of all populist leaders is their avoidance of anything that resembles a comprehensive political programme. Instead they promise simplistic political solutions to specific issues. These solutions then become a trademark of the individual leader<sup>3</sup>. This approach puts the 'people' at the heart of a rhetoric that conflates identity with the polarisation of ideas, cultures and political leanings. As the word 'Populist' suggests, the overriding theme is the representation of the true will of the 'people' against the 'elites'<sup>4</sup>.

Populism can be seen as a symptom of democracy in retreat, but also as an instrument driving that retreat. It taps into fears of new economic, sociological, demographic and technological

developments that together can resonate powerfully with the electorate, as happened in the referendum leading to the departure of the UK from the EU.

An added difficulty of defining populism is that populist methods and narratives are becoming increasingly mainstream. Traditional politicians can easily be tempted by the allure of populist methods if they think they will bring them electoral advantage.

In addition to looking at key trends, this paper analyses four possible futures for populist movements and their impact on the European Union.

**Trends that challenge democracies and contribute to the rise of populism:**

From...	To...
Democratic expansion	Democratic backsliding
Promotion of democracy worldwide	Protecting democracy at home against alternative models
Rules-based multilateral order	Rise of border sovereignty
Primacy of the liberal democratic model	Global competition of systems
Checks and balances	'Populocracy' gaining ground
Experienced elected leader	Inexperienced elected newcomers
'Catch-all' parties cutting across cleavages	Complex power-sharing amid rise of polarising challenger parties
Strong affiliation and party loyalty	Voter volatility
Voter apathy	Citizen engagement and democratic innovations
9 o'clock new narrative in newspaper, radio and TV	24/7 news streaming
Media-validated information	Platforms/social media without filter
Propaganda	Weaponisation of disinformation
Evidence-based policymaking and governance	Data abuse, truth decay
Progress in gender equality and diversity	Cultural backlash through policies which reject diversity

Source: GSC-ART, based on European Political Strategy Centre<sup>5</sup>

## Global trends: what is driving populism?

The recent growth in populist parties and their influence in public debates is often seen as a consequence of democracy fatigue, the economic crisis of the 2000s or the uncontrolled migratory flows coinciding with terrorist attacks in several Member States. Some argue that it is driven by a wider range of structural trends, from the effects of globalisation and world trade on income distribution<sup>6</sup> to a perceived decline in social status<sup>7</sup>. Populist leaders can use open liberal societies as a scapegoat by portraying them as the villains in a nostalgic narrative of an idealised past<sup>8</sup>.

### **A: Global democratic backsliding accelerated in COVID time**

Worldwide, 2020 was the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom<sup>9</sup>. The gap between setbacks and gains widened, as individuals in 64 countries, including many Europeans, experienced a deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, while those in just 37 experienced improvements between 2018 and 2019<sup>10</sup>. Nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced democratic deterioration in 2020. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) reports that in 2020, for the fifth consecutive year, more regimes moved towards authoritarianism than towards greater democracy, the longest period of democratic decline since 1975, when the first study was conducted<sup>11</sup>. According to IDEA, non-democratic countries now constitute 45% of the world's states, a tripling in 30 years.

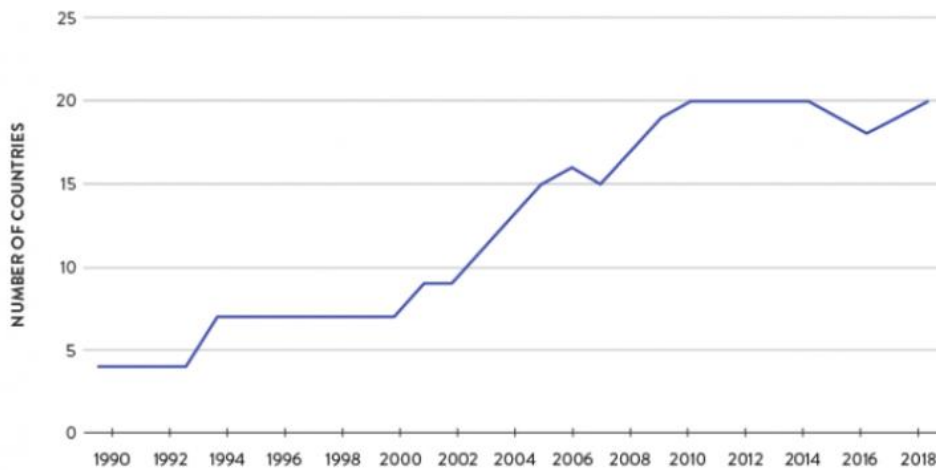
Overall, democracy was dealt a major blow in 2020. Almost 70% of countries covered by The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index<sup>12</sup> recorded a decline in their overall score, as country after country locked down to protect lives from the pandemic. The global average fell to its lowest level since the index began in 2006. While many of the measures were key in helping tackle the pandemic, some see the restrictions which were placed on civil and democratic rights, as well as the increased use of surveillance technology, as undermining democracy. The pandemic is estimated to have weakened democracy in 80 countries, meaning that 34% of the world's population live in democratically declining states.

Graph 1: Democracy Index, Global average of 167 countries, 10 = most democratic



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit<sup>13</sup>

Graph 2: Number of populist governments in power 1980–2019



Source: Tony Blair Institute for global change<sup>14</sup>

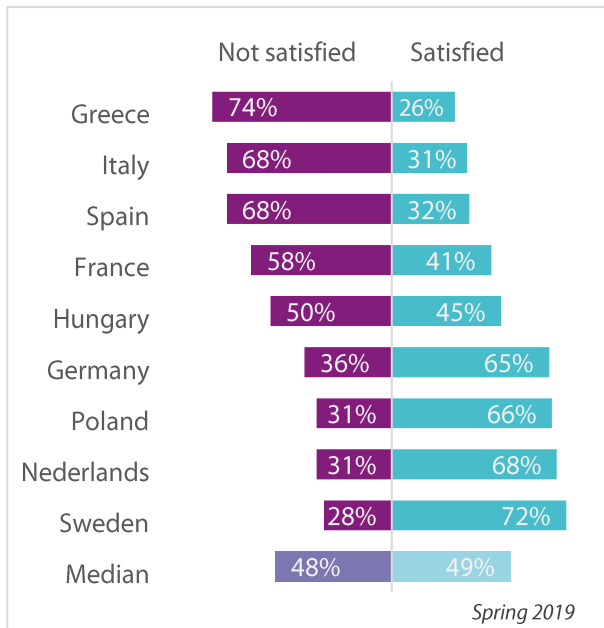
According to The Economist measure of democracy, only about half (49.4%) of the world's population live in a democracy of some sort, and even fewer (8.4%) reside in a 'full democracy', although this is an increase from 5.7% in 2019, as several Asian countries have been upgraded. More than one third of the world's population live under authoritarian rule, with a large share being in China.

Numerous indicators and reports reach a similar conclusion that democratic progress is being undermined throughout the world – including in Europe.

### **The pandemic as a trend accelerator?**

Crises and the uncertainty that they bring appear to lead to increased willingness by citizens to compromise on some basic freedoms in return for increased prosperity, security and stability. This trend has to be seen alongside growing doubts over whether democracies are still able to guarantee the well-being, peace and stability of their citizens. The rise of alternative forms of governance and other economic models raises questions which the West has so far proved unable to answer collectively. There has been a widely-held assumption, particularly after 1990, that the Western liberal democratic model was superior and would therefore ultimately spread to other parts of the world. But in the 21st century, including within the EU, alternatives to liberal democracy are on the rise, and the competition between models is increasing, as illustrated by the vaccine diplomacy of China and Russia.

Graph 3: Percentage of people (not) satisfied with the way democracy is working in their country (2019)



Source: GSC-ART based on Pew Research Center<sup>15</sup>

In parallel with the rise of alternative state models, both the US and EU have witnessed a degree of undermining of the standards and values which underpin their own versions of democratic societies. For instance, in the US in recent years there has been increasing criticism of democratic values and the questioning of some democratic fundamentals, culminating in the assault on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. This trend was marked by a crisis in the representation of political parties, the establishment of populism (or the populism of the establishment), and the impact of new technology (both in its use by authoritarian countries as well as a result of a lack of control of the big tech industry). The use of social media to drive disinformation campaigns from third countries, but also from political parties, also helped fuel the polarisation of society. This has reinforced the lack of trust in institutions and the democratic system. The rise in attacks on fundamental values, the undermining of the rule of law, and personal attacks on political opponents have all contributed to the loss of confidence by citizens in democracy.

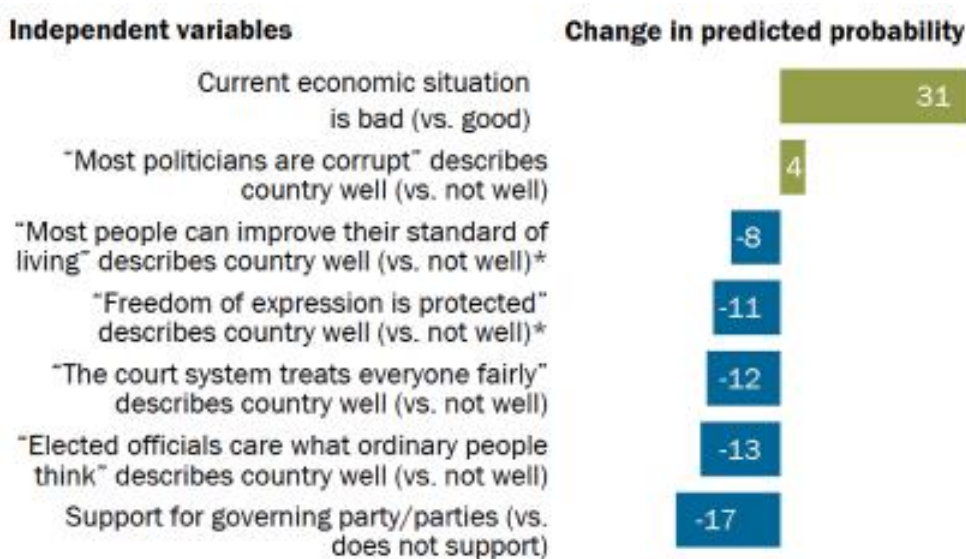
### **B: Social unrest and economic pressures**

In Western democracies, populist parties - both right and left – claim to offer an alternative to the right/left consensus which currently occupies the centre of the political spectrum and which supports 'progressive' social values, globalisation and an open approach to the economy. Despite their differences, notably on relations with third states such as Russia, populist parties present themselves as offering an alternative to this approach. They promote protectionism, a confrontational vision of international relations, a strong emphasis on traditional family and social values and offer a vision of a society that is secure, not least through tight immigration policies and the strict control of borders. The fall-out from the economic and financial crises – including ever-faster growing inequalities – has been used since the mid-2000s by populist parties to promote a policy that claims to support the interest of 'the people' by appealing to a sense that they have lost out economically compared to the so-called liberal elites.

The exploitation of socio-economic factors is key to understanding the populist narrative and to understanding its success<sup>16</sup>. That said, whilst economic arguments are often used by populist parties to gain support, once in government they actually have a far from convincing economic track record, including on social mobility and reducing inequalities, and their incompetence may have substantial economic costs in the medium and long term<sup>17</sup>.

Some analyses of the relationship between increased unemployment and support for non-mainstream parties, in particular populist parties, pinpoint crisis-driven economic insecurity as a key determinant of populism and political distrust<sup>18</sup>. However, other socio-economic factors such as demographic trends, global trade, increasing automation, a lack of social mobility and access to public services also contribute to the rise of populism<sup>19</sup>.

Graph 4: Influence of the economy, evaluation of country on democratic dissatisfaction



\*The full questions were "Most people have a good chance to improve their standard of living" and "The rights of people to express their views in public are protected," respectively. Note: The number shown is the difference in predicted probability of democratic dissatisfaction between selected groups for each variable after controlling for other factors. Only the independent variables that are statistically significant at the  $p < 0,05$  level are shown. For example, the predicted probability that someone is dissatisfied with democracy is 71% for those who think the current economic situation is bad, compared with 40% for those who say the economic situation is good, a difference of 31 percentage points. The analysis is based on 24,326 respondents in 26 countries.

Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q2 & Q34a-c, f-g.

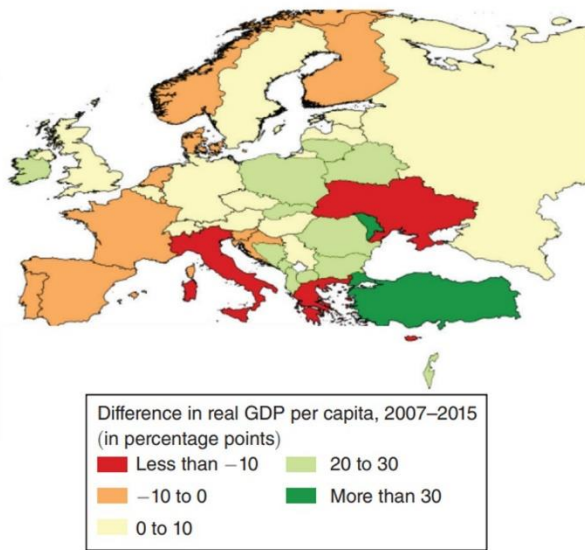
Source: Pew Research centre<sup>20</sup>

Note: The report, which looks at a group of 27 countries worldwide, covers flawed democracies but no authoritarian states. It includes the US and a number of EU Member States.

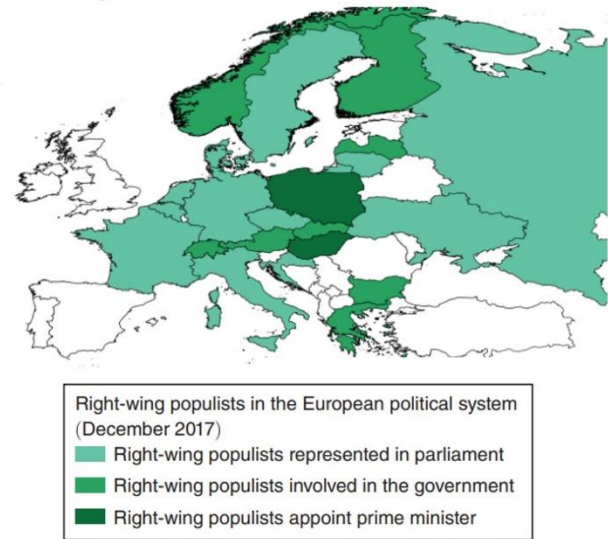
Overall, the extensive research on the purely economic drivers of populism is rather inconclusive. There is no single causal link between economic factors and support for populist movements (see Graph 5), but nonetheless, it is clear that socio-economic factors do play a role in the rise of populism.

Graph 5: There is no simple causal relation between cumulative GDP change and the presence of right-wing populists in the political system

Panel A. Cumulative change in GDP per capita between 2007 and 2016



Panel B. Right-wing populist parties in national political systems, 2017



Source: Boeri et al.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between economic shocks and support for populist movements is indirect. It involves opposing the will of the apparently innocent populace against a corrupt elite, and undermining trust in national institutions from sections of society such as workers whose jobs are displaced because of technological progress or trade<sup>22</sup>. Research shows that 'economic insecurity can affect both participation in an election and voting for a populist party because it affects people's confidence in political parties'<sup>23</sup>.

According to some studies, what matters for voters is not necessarily overall economic gains or losses, but rather a perception of 'whether their individual economic outcomes occur for fair reasons'. This is borne out by a clear geographical correlation between low social mobility and the rise of populism, while there is no similar match for income and wealth inequality<sup>24</sup>.

A sense of economic unfairness is also an important factor in the undermining of liberal values amongst the middle class. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the incomes of the working and middle classes in both the EU and US have stagnated, and this has been further exacerbated by longer-term trends in technology and trade patterns. This calls into question the traditional role of the liberal order as 'a source of economic security and protection'<sup>25</sup>. As a result, 'In their struggle to preserve their socioeconomic position, parts of the middle classes are turning to protest politics, believing that populist strongmen will protect their interests'<sup>26</sup>.

Growing disparities between city hubs and rural areas, in terms of economic, social and cultural opportunities, also act as a driver for populism. Unemployment rates, education, income levels and shares of immigrants - widely considered as key determinants for far-right populist support - differ substantially between urban and non-urban areas, which partly explains the different levels of populist support. At the same time, the higher tendency to vote for populist parties in rural areas is also believed to be linked to demographic trends (with lower population growth increasing the likeliness of a far-right populist vote) and access to public services (again, the lower the access, the higher the likeliness of a far-right populist vote)<sup>27</sup>.



The territorial aspect of economic inequality as a driver of populism should not be underestimated. In addition to inequality between individuals (the haves and the have-nots/left-behind), inequality between *places* also shapes voting patterns and can generate a 'geography of discontent' of regions which have experienced long-term economic or industrial decline. This in turn can lead to an increase in anti-system voting. This phenomenon has been characterised as 'the revenge of places that don't matter'<sup>28</sup>, and is crucial in explaining why support for populist parties is very often regionally concentrated rather than a wider national trend.

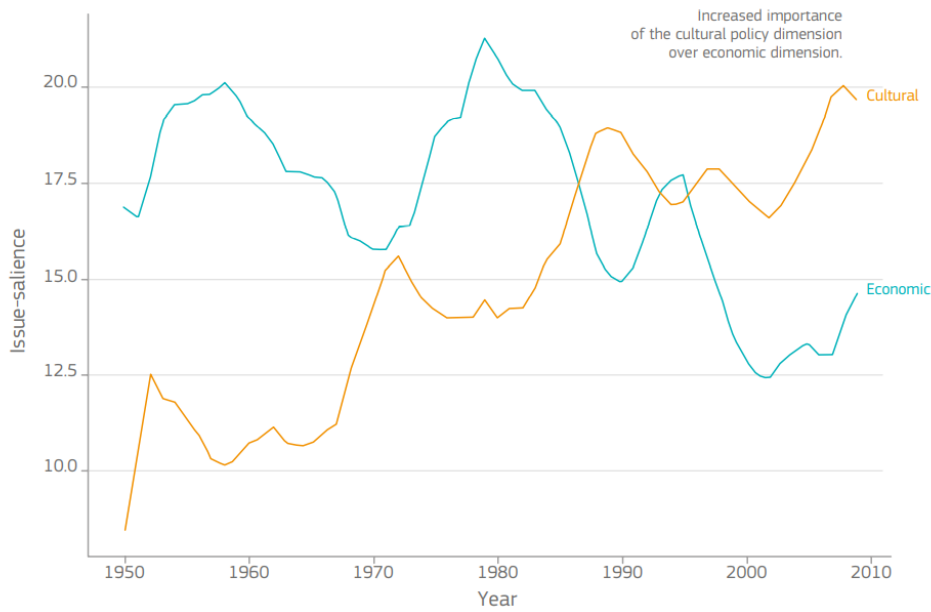
### **C: Polarisation and a crisis of representation fuel populist politics**

Polarisation, whether it be along economic, geographical, cultural or political lines, affects societies around the world and creates a fertile ground for populist movements. Research has shown that political identities are shifting from an economic to a cultural basis, which in turn means that society is polarising more on cultural than economic lines<sup>29</sup>. This means that as well as issues related to socio-economic status, individual values, attitudes and identities have become increasingly important in predicting political behaviour<sup>30</sup>.

The two most important components of identity are personal and social identity. Personal identity is based on an individual's values, experiences and knowledge, and is generally regarded as unique<sup>31</sup>. Social identity refers to the groups or social categories with which a person identifies, and is more concerned with self-concept and self-esteem. People tend to choose to identify with a specific group based on shared goals and values.

In general personal values change slowly. Individuals will often react negatively when confronted with new and radically different set of social values. Because values play a key role in determining personal and group identity, a feeling of being excluded by society as a result of changing and unfamiliar values can lead individuals to align with groups that reject not only new values, but also other more basic values of society<sup>32</sup>. As societies across Europe increasingly adopt a more socially liberal attitude towards issues such as gender, LGBTQ+ rights and ethnicity, those with a more traditional approach feel that their own value system, and in turn their very identity, is threatened. Individuals then often seek to protect their identities through increased tribalism and discrimination against perceived outsiders<sup>33</sup>. This could be further exacerbated by ideologies which first emerged in the US but which are now entering the European media landscape. Drawing on polarisation, the proponents of wokeism, 'cancel culture', or racialism, are pushing for a radical break with existing political, cultural and anthropological traditions. Populists are in turn exploiting this to attract support. The success of populist parties is often determined by the extent to which their leaders manage to unite their followers as a tribe.

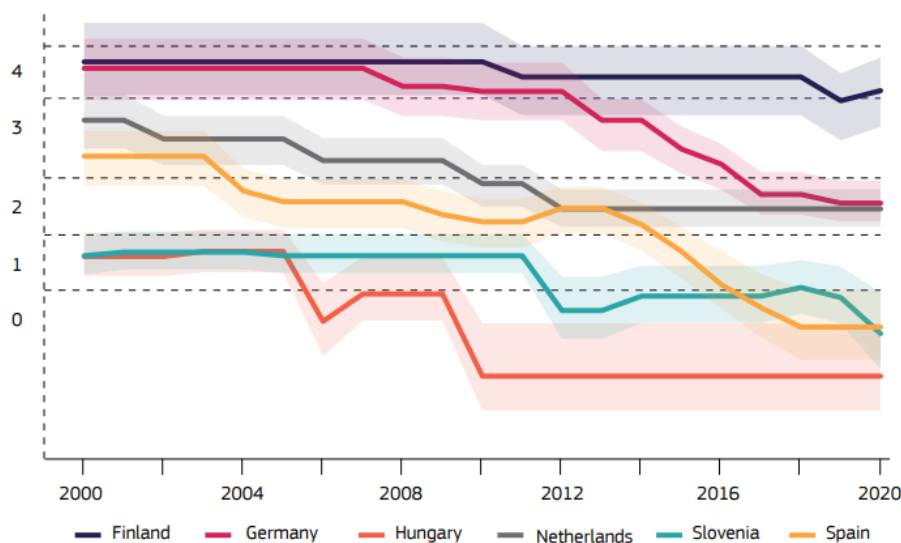
**Graph 6: Cultural and economic issue salience in political manifestos in 21 western democracies**



Source: Joint Research Centre<sup>34</sup>

While disparities in wealth and income remain important dividers, they coexist and often align with additional differences on issues such as attitudes towards migration and the integration of minorities. These are predominantly framed in terms of values and identity. Cultural and economic identifiers are interconnected. People switch effortlessly between them, although they tend to stick within a group once they have associated themselves with a specific movement<sup>35</sup>. The divisions between different camps are then less about a preference for particular policy or agenda, but more an issue of group identity. Since social identity based on cultural aspects such as shared values is largely non-negotiable, compromise becomes more difficult, which hampers the ability of political institutions to deliver solutions<sup>36</sup>.

**Graph 7: Polarisation of selected societies in Europe**

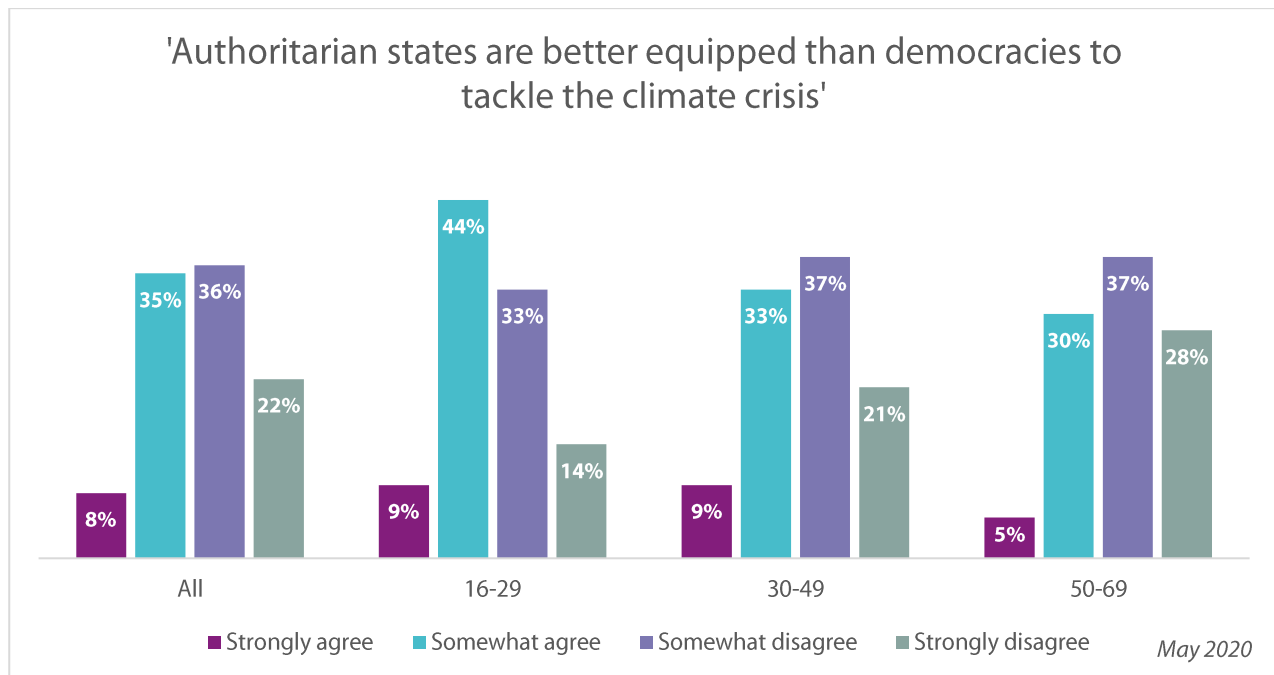


Note: 0 indicates serious polarisation on almost all key political issues and 4 indicates no polarisation.

Source: Joint Research Centre<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the impact on society of major changes resulting from the green and digital transitions will become increasingly visible over the next few years. If not properly managed, these could lead to significant disruption and further polarisation. Political leaders, particularly those who came to power on populist platforms, play a central role in stoking societal polarisation, sometimes for short-term political gains<sup>38</sup>. And as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, populists also tend to use disruptive events to drive societies further apart<sup>39</sup>.

Graph 8: Attitudes of EU-27 respondents towards the ability of authoritarian governments to tackle the climate crisis



Source: GSC-ART, based on eupinions<sup>40</sup>

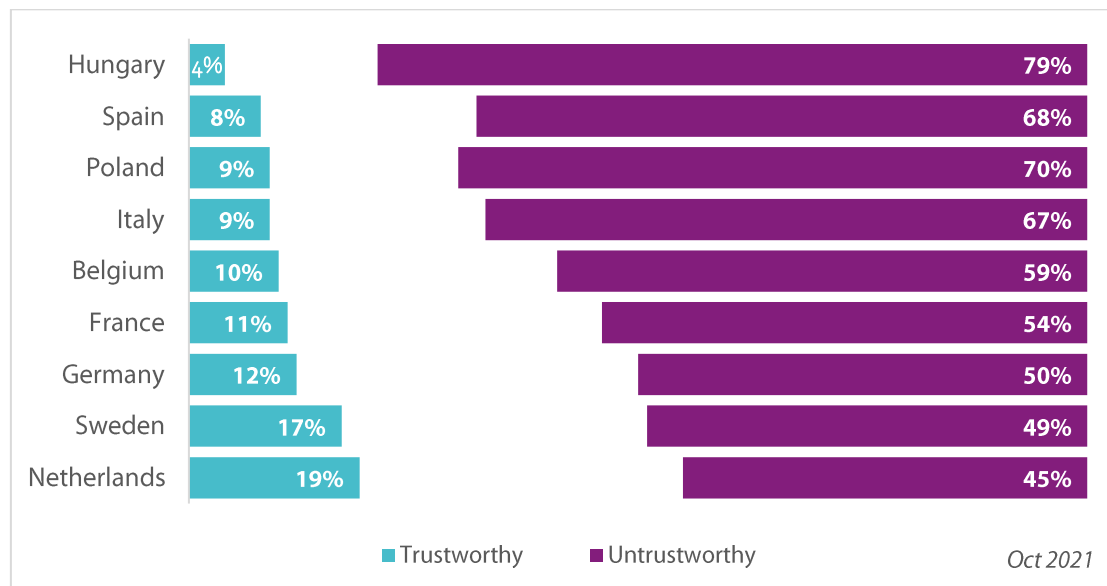
Increasing societal polarisation coincides with what has been called a crisis of representative democracy and a decline in traditional political parties. In established democratic systems, political parties in theory fulfil two core functions: first, they aggregate the needs and demands of the citizens and represent them to the state. Second, they organise and give coherence to government institutions by translating the interests of both their supporters and the wider public into concrete policies<sup>41</sup>. It has been argued that in recent years parties have increasingly neglected their representative function in favour of their governing role<sup>42</sup>. Caught between acting as representatives of their electorate and as responsible governors in an ever more complex, globalised world, parties began to focus more on fulfilling their governing responsibilities towards a wide range of domestic, international and supranational stakeholders<sup>43</sup>. Similar developments have affected traditional trade unions and employers' organisations, whose scope for action within a globalised economy has been reduced, leading to a disconnect with the interests of those they represent. The representation of citizens, if happening at all, is increasingly being taken over by actors outside the party system such as single-issue social movements, local communities, non-governmental organisations, lobbies, the media and social media advocates.

Populist parties exploit this decline in representation within the traditional system by portraying themselves as the voice of the people both at the national and regional level. Their response

ranges from challenging established parties within the system to a radical rejection of the entire party system. This can give rise to authoritarian tendencies, with attempts to gain power outside the political system<sup>44</sup>. In recent years populist parties have increasingly been able to gain ground in disadvantaged areas and among young people<sup>45</sup>. At the same time, extensive but often diffuse protest movements ('anti-movements') are successfully fomenting popular discontent either by conflating a range of divisive issues or by projecting a number of societal problems into a single polarising issue. This trend is encouraged by the shift of traditional parties, especially on the left side of the political spectrum, towards the centre, particularly on economic policy. Instead of supporting welfare for the working class, parties on the centre-left are increasingly pushing more liberal approaches to social security. Many parties on the moderate left now tend to identify themselves more in terms of their progressive and liberal views on social issues, which gain more traction amongst urban, better educated potential voters<sup>46</sup>, than economic policy. This leaves room for challengers to emerge from the far ends of the political spectrum.

This trend means that voters risk being left with the impression that all traditional parties are essentially the same, an impression that can be reinforced by the perceived collusive behaviour of political elites. Political parties that regularly govern together can be perceived as unprincipled and depleting state resources for their own benefit<sup>47</sup>, a view that is prevalent not only among followers of populist movements, but also among significant parts of the general public. Clientelism, patronages or corruption scandals within established parties further erode trust in political elites<sup>48</sup>.

Graph 9: Perception of trustworthiness of politicians in selected EU member states



Source: GSC-ART based on IPSOS Mori<sup>49</sup>

The decline in representation also affects countries with less well established democratic systems. Here, the instability of a system marked by frequent change in political leadership limits the ability of parties to build lasting connections to a voting base. When combined with the perception of political corruption and an inability to deliver on policy, a space is created for 'centrist populist parties', whose defining features are a strong anti-corruption and anti-

establishment attitude<sup>50</sup>. Unlike radical populist movements from both ends of the spectrum, centrist populists usually do not offer ideologically motivated promises around identity and protection from global competition. Instead, they primarily focus on claims of greater competence and critique of the establishment<sup>51</sup>.

Overall, both societal polarisation and the decline of representative democracy offer fertile ground for populist arguments. But at the heart of both trends there are genuine needs of specific (and often disadvantaged) sectors of society. Populist arguments are especially able to gain traction if those needs are perceived as inadequately addressed by the existing political system.

**Graph 10: Three Ways That Populists From The Right Frame 'Us vs. Them' Conflict**

	Cultural Populism	Socio-Economic Populism	Anti-Establishment Populism
<b>The people</b>	'Native' members of the nation-state	Hard-working, honest members of the working class, which may transcend national boundaries	Hard-working, honest victims of a state run by special interests
<b>The others</b>	Non-natives, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities, cosmopolitan elites	Big business, capital owners, foreign or 'imperial' forces that prop up an international capitalist system	Political elites who represent the prior regime
<b>Key themes</b>	Emphasis on religious traditionalism, law and order, national sovereignty, migrants as enemies	Anti-capitalism, working-class solidarity, foreign business interests as enemies, often joined with anti-Americanism	Purging the state from corruption, strong leadership to promote reforms

Source: GSC-ART, based on Tony Blair Institute for global change<sup>52</sup>

## **D: A harsh political discourse**

### **Unfiltered and biased messaging**

We live in a world where the real and the virtual, fact and commentary, the observable and the anecdotal, and individuality and self-image are so intertwined that it has become more difficult to distinguish between them. It is not easy to remain objective in an era of mass communication.

In the 20th century, journalism was built on the traditional media of radio, TV and of course newspapers. That is now undergoing massive disruption against the background of a fast evolving digital media landscape. As digital platforms have come to occupy such a dominant place in the world of the media, newspaper circulation has dropped in most Western democracies. At the same time, phenomena such as the algorithmic amplification of mis/disinformation, hate speech, conspiracy theories and deep fake, and the ability to customise messages to individuals are taking hold. When deployed on a massive scale, they have the capacity to influence and weaken trust in democratic processes, public institutions and the media.

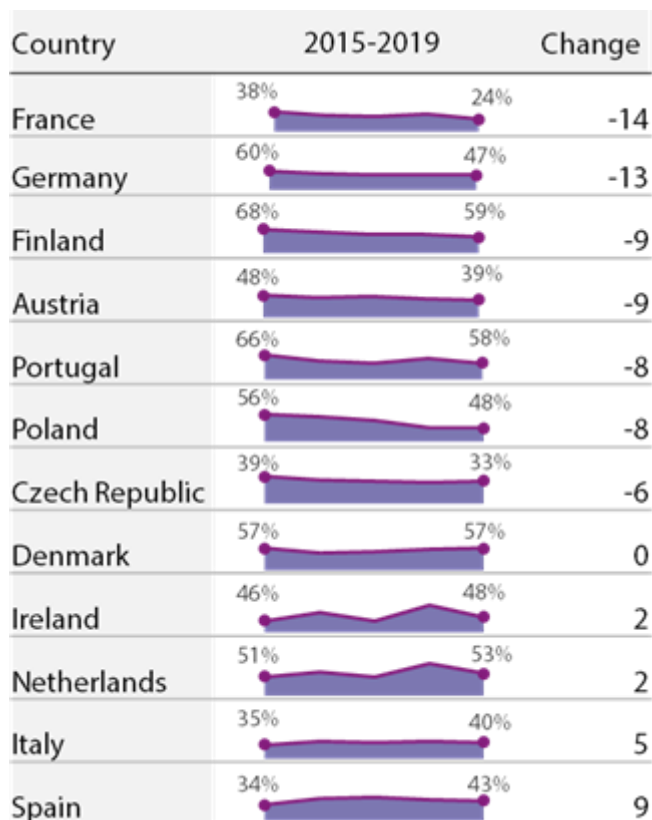
This already has several consequences. One of the biggest threats to socio-liberal democracy is the strengthening of a public discourse based on virtual or alternative facts and truth. The public debate on scientific matters related to COVID vaccines has illustrated the scale of these tensions. The pandemic exacerbates an existing trend, also called 'truth decay'<sup>53</sup>. This takes the form of increasing disagreement about objective truth, which leads to a blurring of the line between opinion and fact. This trend has been exacerbated by an increase in the overall volume of information and the reach of social media networks. The result is an emphasis on opinion and personal experience over fact, with a declining trust in traditionally respected sources of objective information. These are in addition attacked by populist leaders as part of shaping their own narrative.

The misuse of digital communication risks exacerbating the existing trend towards a polarisation of opinions, not just on policy issues but also in relation to core values. Recent cases raised by whistle-blowers have underlined the (false) impression of the extent to which such views are supported<sup>54</sup> and the implications for democratic systems. The Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2016 saw the collection of data from millions of users for the purpose of election manipulation. The aftermath of the 'Facebook Files' has revealed the platform's lack of engagement in addressing issues of racial tension and its inability to control fully the scope of its algorithms. According to the findings from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre<sup>55</sup>, the choice of digital architecture and the algorithm content curation shape political messages and undermine political discourse. Online behaviour is determined by framing and dark patterns chosen by companies. These 'prompt lenient privacy settings to increase user engagement. These design features limit freedom of association, truth-finding, opportunities to discover new perspectives, creating challenges for democratic discourse and the autonomous formation of political preferences'<sup>56</sup>. In addition, 'curated newsfeeds and automated recommender systems are designed to maximize user attention by satisfying their presumed preferences, which can mean highlighting polarising, misleading, extremist or otherwise problematic content to maximize user engagement'<sup>57</sup>. Multiple studies show that people of moderate convictions, both right and left, are increasingly reluctant to express themselves on political subjects, leaving the field open to more extreme messaging<sup>58</sup>.

Social media and their algorithms have changed the nature of democratic debate, public deliberation and citizen participation. This is fertile ground that populists use to gain support.

Digitisation has also helped in spreading the influence of new 'non-establishment' stakeholders (beyond the 'classical' social partners and interlocutors), who are looking to be more actively involved in the development and implementation of key policies. This, in turn, raises questions about the representativeness of these organisations and the balance between representative democracy and direct democracy. Social media can be used to amplify criticism of representative democracy that can alienate support for traditional political parties, and push an anti-technocratic, anti-elite discourse. This generates impatience with the longer timeframes which are a necessary part of the democratic process, and lends credence to the idea that every assertion, whether substantiated or not, has the same value. In addition, AI systems tend to lead to a downplaying of the notion of a collective good by amplifying ideologies based on identity. As a result, algorithmic amplification can increase tensions and uncertainty around the limits on free speech<sup>59</sup>.

Graph 11: Percentage of people who trust most news media reporting most of the time (2015-2019)



Source: GSC ART based on data from Reuters Institute<sup>60</sup>

### Is there a populist method?

Populist parties and leaders use a range of different approaches to communication, but similarities emerge from the observation of their election campaigns. Contemporary political communication uses social media to create a direct link with a voter support base. The message resorts to identification by culture or origin and the opposition between 'them and us'. That divide is used as a building block for a narrative that focuses on polemics. It is based on an appeal to

ordinary people who feel their concerns have been disregarded by elite groups. Paradoxically such an appeal is frequently driven/led by someone who was/is part of an elite group. There are some parallels with more traditional political parties. The candidate is presented as a spokesperson, an intermediary in the face of other forms of representation in which a part of the population does not recognise itself. The claims of genuine political representation, heightened through the effective use of new communication channels, are a strong element in the populists' armoury.

Populists address the electorate more by the use of a narrative than objective argument and quantifiable outcomes. The notion of 'truth decay' mentioned above is often visible in their communication: 'lying is the message'<sup>61</sup>. Populists do not shy away from telling lies - not only (or sometimes not at all) to spread false information, but also to show that they can get away with knowingly and willingly telling lies as a way of confirming their power. Supporters accept such lies, valuing sincerity (to be understood as 'the genuine representation of one's inner beliefs and thoughts'<sup>62</sup>) over accuracy<sup>63</sup>. Populists' messages aim to provide reassurance to a population that may be sensitive to a loss of traditional reference points and the absence of a collective narrative. They respond to a need for a sense of security in a globalised world and to a loss of confidence in traditional institutions such as the church and trade unions. The identity criterion therefore serves as a unifying political link.

Populism is often, but not always, combined with the rise of strong leaders. Those who have felt marginalised are given hope by and then put their trust in an individual, often charismatic, who benefits from social media exposure and the lack of a filter. People are led to feel that such a personality understands their grievances and can defend their interests, both nationally and internationally.

The search for maximum media visibility, the promise of easy solutions, and the offer of answers to everything before the questions have even been asked are not specific to populist parties. But they can easily lead to an attempt by politicians to try to outbid each other. They adapt their promises to meet the aspirations of different sectors of the population as part of their aim of winning widespread support.

This is a huge challenge for traditional politics. A range of economic, social and international issues can be used as amplifiers by populist parties to illustrate and reinforce their vision of the world, with little concern for real solutions to real problems.

### **Scenarios for the EU**

The departure of the UK from the EU brought with it some uncertainty about the future. At the same time, the EU has had to deal with challenges in several Member States to basic principles such as the rule of law.<sup>64</sup> These challenges have taken the form of increasing politicisation of the judicial branch, a weakening of free speech, pressure on the freedom of expression and on other sources of information (including academia and civil society), pressure on the freedom of assembly (and association), corruption and attacks on media freedoms and other fundamental rights. This has an external dimension as some Member States are reshaping their relationship with China and/or Russia through a rather different prism from the prevailing European orthodoxy.

Recent years have seen a multiplication in efforts by some third countries to reshape international institutions in a bid to counter-balance the traditional influence of the West. China has developed



a very deliberate strategy of using international organisations as a tool to promote its own long-term interests, in particular by securing key appointments in order to obtain political leverage<sup>65</sup>. The prospect of more populist parties in charge in Europe hampers our unity on these issues and leaves more room for foreign interference.

Voters are not only polarised but also more volatile. They have gradually become less inclined to identify with a single traditional party, and are increasingly driven by single issues (e.g., on the right: migration; on the left: climate change). This has created a growing challenge for traditional politicians. In addition, whilst rational debate still plays a role in influencing voter intentions, emotions are an increasingly important driver, and are frequently triggered by social media content within a particular bubble. This creates a challenge for political parties, particularly when it comes to coalition building. Ideological responsiveness is conditioned by the level of volatility in the electorate<sup>66</sup>. Indeed an increase in volatility can lead to less predictability, greater complexity, and more time needed to form coalitions.

Even if there is no single 'populist handbook', the methods populists use to access power and the way that power is then exercised are relatively homogeneous and accentuate the polarisation of societies. They adopt an exclusive approach to politics, dividing the political landscape into friends and enemies. For the EU, this means that the greater the extent of populist parties in Member States' governments, the more difficult it will be to deliver EU policies.

Populist parties exploit public distrust of the EU. They brand it as a construction of the elite, but also challenge its role as a promoter of liberal values, questioning its policies on migration and support for a multicultural society, and challenging its principles and values such as cultural tolerance and religious neutrality.

If European populist parties have been predominantly anti-EU and anti-euro, this tendency has diminished in recent years, possibly as a result of the very obvious complications surrounding the UK's withdrawal. There has instead been a shift from an existential questioning of the EU to strong criticism of its policies (migration, economic liberalism) and its portrayal as 'dictating' to Member States. This of course ignores Member States' legal commitments under the treaties, and is no less confrontational in its approach. Indeed, it may be far more dangerous for the EU than Brexit, as it aims at undermining it from the inside, thus turning it into a vehicle for populist policies.

Populist parties are evolving just as the pandemic has served to highlight some of the challenges facing European democracies. These include limits on the use by the executive of emergency powers, and the difficulties of securing public trust in a crisis situation<sup>67</sup>.

### **Possible scenarios**

This paper adopts an approach inspired by Jim Dator's 'alternative futures' methodology<sup>68</sup> and posits four scenarios:

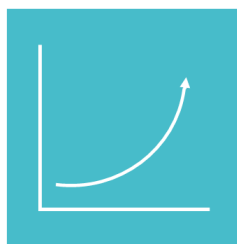
1. A scenario in which populism continues to grow as a political force;
2. A scenario in which populism declines and eventually collapses;
3. A scenario in which populism is 'disciplined' and incorporated within existing structures of democratic governance;
4. A scenario in which populism undergoes radical transformations which ultimately alter the nature of representative democracy itself.

For each of these scenarios, the paper explores the conditions which may lead towards a particular future and the impact it might have on the EU and its institutions. The scenarios are not intended as 'predictions' on the future (which is why the paper refrains from identifying 'most likely' or even explicit 'best-case' scenarios), but rather as a tool to generate insights into observable current dynamics. The four scenarios are meant to be mutually exclusive, but the fact that they are all grounded in the present inevitably means that there will be some overlap. If it is possible to predict anything, it is that the future is almost certain to contain elements from each of the four scenarios, at different times and in different places.

## Four possible futures of populism

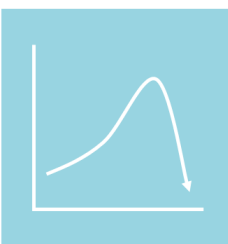
### CONTINUED GROWTH

Growing political power continues to destabilize and divide



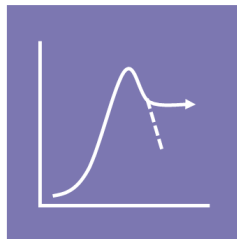
### DECLINE

Loss of political power leads to a decline of the movement



### DISCIPLINE

Playing by the rules can change the game



### TRANSFORMATION

Shift to more direct forms of political participation and/or authoritarianism



Source: GSC-ART, based on Park<sup>69</sup>

### Continued growth

In this scenario, populism continues to grow as a political force – both in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Populist leaders increasingly set the political agenda and the tone of public discourse. Even when in government, populist parties continue to act as anti-systemic forces contributing to instability, division and polarisation.

### What does this scenario look like?

While individual populist parties and leaders may face mixed fortunes, populism itself remains strong and populist forces continue to make electoral gains. Where some populist leaders have lost support (for example as a result of a poor response to the COVID-19 pandemic), others have emerged to take their place – not only through forming new populist movements, but also by taking over and reshaping existing traditional parties.

Populist presence on social media grows ever larger - especially in Europe, where US-based social media are less active in censoring disinformation<sup>70</sup>. Even when some accounts are censored, new accounts are created on alternative social media (e.g. Telegram) and populist messages are

shared and amplified by users across platforms. Populist parties also gain increased coverage on traditional mainstream media, which find it convenient to focus on the 'theatrics of political performance'<sup>71</sup> as they strive to attract audiences. As they lose ground to populists, mainstream political parties increasingly resort to mimicking the tactics and discourses of populist leaders – for example by personalising politics around strong leading figures, and by focusing on typical populist themes – thereby blurring the lines, legitimising them further and contributing to the firm establishment of populist narratives.

When in government, populist parties tend to either occupy or delegitimise other institutions which are meant to provide checks and balances on the executive. They also operate in a state of permanent electoral campaign which fuels divisions and prevents the effective pursuit of policy agendas. Policy failures are blamed on the 'deep state' and other real or imagined elites, as well as on other states and institutions. This allows populist parties to continue to present themselves as opposition forces, even when they are in power.

### **What conditions lead to this scenario?**

The trends which favoured the initial rise of populism remain prominent in society, and intensify. The benefits of post-COVID recovery accrue unevenly to different societal strata, contributing further to economic polarisation. The economic recovery of EU Member States takes place at different speeds, exacerbating economic divisions and calling into question EU solidarity. This in turn creates the ideal conditions for populist parties to exploit 'frugal vs. prodigal' narratives in the construction of 'the other'. New migration crises – whether real or fabricated – provide populists with further arguments to claim that national identity is under threat.

The media landscape contributes to this polarisation. Social media act as echo chambers for the diffusion of alternative truths among specific groups. Mainstream media are increasingly perceived as partisan and untrustworthy. Voters struggle to distinguish reliable and unreliable sources, and they filter information through their own confirmation bias. Without common agreement on basic facts, society lacks common narratives as well.

Mainstream parties also play a role in the emergence of this scenario, in particular by failing to interpret society's needs and anxieties, to connect with voters, and to provide adequate policy responses and inclusive narratives. On the other hand, in trying to mimic populist leaders, they allow them to set the political agenda and discourse. While populist parties are successful in mobilising their core electorate, and mainstream parties try to compete on their ground to capture that share of the ballots, moderate voters feel increasingly disillusioned with representative democracy and turn away from traditional forms of political participation (see also the transformation scenario, below).

### **What impact on the EU?**

As populism keeps growing over time, populist parties become ever better organised, including on a transnational basis. In the European Parliament, for example, populist parties reach a critical mass and their MEPs increasingly tend to form their own political groups instead of joining other mainstream non-populist groups. This reduces the scope for their political socialisation, and increases their potential to disrupt EU political processes. Similar dynamics take place in the Council, where populist leaders increasingly attempt to constitute blocking minorities. Faced with deadlocks on key policy initiatives, Member States with non-populists governments work together through enhanced cooperation, coalitions of the willing, joint declarations etc. As a

result, the EU becomes increasingly intergovernmental, and the narrative of the EU as an integration project is called into question.

As a result of the growth of populism, the EU's legitimacy is threatened in at least three ways. Firstly, populist discourses successfully depict the EU as part of the 'deep state' and as an instrument of the 'elite', pitting it against the 'people'. Leaders of mainstream parties also contribute to this narrative, as they try to compete against populist leaders by presenting the EU to national audiences in purely transactional terms, emphasising the gains and concessions they may have been able to wrestle from 'Brussels'. Secondly, populism harms the EU's output legitimacy, by disrupting its policy processes and keeping it from delivering on key objectives. Finally, disinformation and post-truth dynamics erode the EU's ability to affirm the legitimacy of its policies on the basis of facts and expertise.

### **Disciplined**

In a scenario where populism as a trend is disciplined, the existing political system turns out to be sufficiently resilient to cope with and channel the influence and power of populist parties. They join the game, playing by the rules – and by playing along, they manage to change the outcome of the game. Populism transforms from a political movement into a policymaking force.

#### **What does this scenario look like?**

At national level, populist parties join in government coalitions. At the European level, they establish a strong and powerful political group. At both levels, they integrate into the political system as we currently know it and they take part in the decision-making process – constructively, by engaging in negotiations and being part of winning coalitions on some topics, or less productively, by making use of their capacity to constitute blocking minorities around issues of interest. As such, populist parties manage to leave their mark on the political agenda. Nationalism finds a place in European politics. For example, populists have been able to join forces and exploit Europe when it suits their domestic purposes (for example on issues like migration) in order to advance their political and policy agendas. With populist parties represented in the political structures, public support for democratic decision-making might increase, whilst the resulting policies, for example on migration or economic issues, would look very different. If public concerns are addressed, activism is expected to decrease.

#### **What conditions lead to this scenario?**

To become part of the system, populist parties need to achieve lasting electoral success and gain access to parliaments and to government. Once in power, they would need to adopt an openness to working constructively in the political arena. This does not mean that populist parties need to change their agendas or policy goals, but they would need to agree to work within the existing political decision-making framework. This implies that populist parties need to address a number of internal contradictions, not least their stance towards the EU.

#### **What is the impact on the EU?**

At least in the short term, the EU institutional structures would remain intact and unchanged, which could strengthen the EU's legitimacy. Furthermore, the engagement of populist parties

with the EU could potentially help bridge the gap between 'the people' and 'Brussels'. This would also be visible in the communication style of the institutions.

As populist parties become a force within the system, affirming their democratic legitimacy, and use it to their benefit, they change the internal dynamic of the institutions, all of which see a growing presence of populist players. The EU's policies and eventually its character could change substantially under the influence of increased populist involvement, to the detriment of traditional parties and policies. At the same time, the fact that political issues and values are often too polarised for parties from across the spectrum to find common ground – for example on policies related to identity –, might lead the EU to re-focus on technical issues. Taken together, these changes to the EU and the policymaking process might negatively impact the normative power of the EU globally.

Eventually, 'playing by the rules' could transform into 'setting new rules', with a potential medium and long term impact. It is not difficult to imagine that populists would challenge and eventually work towards re-defining EU competences or the primacy of EU law. In the long term, this may trigger a profound transformation, as populist forces take over and change or hollow out the institutions from within.

It is worth considering the impact that this scenario might have on EU civil servants. Many of them having joined the institutions with pro-EU motivations<sup>72</sup>, it would remain to be seen to which extent, in the long term, the EU civil service would be ready to service institutions that move away from their initial values toward a more populist course.

## **Decline**

In a scenario where populism declines, populist movements experience a loss in political power. Electoral losses, a collapse of their movement or less public attention on their core issues can lead to a slow disappearance of populism from the political stage. However, a decline is unlikely to happen equally across countries and is not necessarily a positive outcome for existing political systems.

### **What does this scenario look like?**

A decline in populism materialises most prominently in a decline in their parties' political clout, such as in the form of electoral losses, while more moderate or traditional parties regain ground. Single-issue parties could experience decline if they are perceived as having achieved their goal. Populist movements outside the party system experience a decline in public support. Their ability to garner support decreases and their leaders gain less attention in the media.

On a European level, electoral defeats of leaders who ran on a populist platform can lead to fewer splits within the Council and European Council. Fewer populist parties in the European Parliament could strengthen the more established parties and lead to an increase in seats for the biggest political groups.

However, without an outlet for their political expression, some of the former supporters of populist movements could establish new, less public structures. Some may even go as far as to believe that resorting to radical actions and violence could be the only way to make their voice

heard. Declining populist movements would therefore lead to radicalised groups outside the political system that challenge its legitimacy.

### **What conditions lead to this scenario?**

For a decline in political power and influence, populist movements, which were able to participate in elections, would need to have lost elections and/or significant shares of their votes. A higher turnout of moderate voters who vote for established parties could decrease populist vote shares, as could coalition-building behaviour of non-populist parties or the emergence of a competitor that would then split the populist vote. Further increased distrust of potential populist voters in the system could also lead to increased abstention from voting.

Problems within the populist movements, such as charges of corruption, incompetence or an inability to deliver on promises, could further undermine support. Internal power struggles as well as a discrediting or ousting of key leadership figures could cause movements to collapse. An inability to engage with the political system as a result of a lack of party structure or poor results in elections due to high vote thresholds or first-past-the-post systems is another potentially derailing factor<sup>73</sup>.

In addition, decreasing traction for the issues around which a populist movement has formed can lead to decline. The issue could have been addressed or taken up by traditional parties as part of their political agenda in reaction to the populist challenge<sup>74</sup>. The emergence of significant new issues could be a challenge for existing movements if they be unable to engage with them.

Finally, the reach of populist movements on social media could be negatively affected. This could be as a result of citizens leaving the platform due to the toxicity of the discourse, or because of targeted action against certain types of speech and misinformation. The impact of WhatsApp on elections in other parts of the world shows that limiting access to social networks can help to avoid the spread of fake news or electoral manipulation<sup>75</sup>. And as the fallout from the deletion of Twitter accounts of political leaders in January 2021 demonstrates, it is possible to deprive them of both their capacity to influence and an audience. A de-platforming of vocal populist leaders could diminish their ability to influence public discourses.

### **What impact on the EU?**

A decline of populist forces in a Member State could lead to fewer heated debates over divisive issues being played out in public. While this may simplify decision-making on some issues, it could also mean less publicity for the views of the former supporters of populist movements. Given the need to reflect the diversity of voices within the Union, a decline in public interest could serve to undermine the representative nature of the EU and the legitimacy of the public discourse.

It is also important to consider that populism can increase the responsiveness of a political system by increasing voter turnout across social classes and by achieving closer alignment between voters and parties<sup>76</sup>. A lack of populist contenders could lead to lower voter participation in European parliamentary elections, which in turn could be seen as reducing the EU's legitimacy. Meanwhile, the possible emergence of new, potentially radicalised anti-movements outside the political system would hamper the EU's ability to engage, thus further challenging the legitimacy of a system unable to encompass a significant group of dissatisfied people.

Finally, in highlighting contested issues, populist movements can oblige other political actors to develop their own responses. Without a populist challenge the EU may be tempted to focus

primarily on technical issues and neglect engagement with issues of values or identity. Ultimately, the decline of populist parties could lead to a drop in voter participation as part of the population would no longer feel represented by any party.

## **Transformation**

In a scenario where populism is transformed, politics more widely will undergo radical change. The worst case scenario is the continuing success of populism that ends up being transformed into a system of authoritarian government. This would be an existential issue for the EU. But another scenario could be that populism gives rise to structural changes that would oblige those in the political arena, if they are to continue to operate, to adapt and reinvent themselves.

### **What does this scenario look like?**

Being 'normal' makes you a target. The normalisation of populist parties (see the scenarios in which populism is disciplined or continues to grow) can force them to question their position and role, because they become subject to the traditional democratic process and are part of the political system. Being in campaign mode is different from holding positions of responsibility and being held accountable. Those same issues and methods which resulted in electoral success may lead to public disenchantment if they do not deliver actual results and expose the cynicism of the leadership<sup>77</sup>. This applies, for example, to the argument of representation of the people against the elites, or slogans to address transnational political concerns such as migration.

Loss of confidence, declining voter turnout, or the attractiveness of non-electoral citizen movements are affecting all political parties. Increased participation of the moderate electorate may also reduce the relative importance of populist forces. Populist parties may have to reinvent themselves in a more general context of dissatisfaction with representative democracy<sup>78</sup>. Voting remains by far the most significant and most obvious expression of traditional political participation, with other forms (e.g. attendance at political campaign events, participation in volunteer organisations, posting comments on political issues online, participating in organised protests) remaining relatively low globally.

### **What conditions lead to this scenario?**

There are some clear changes in the way that citizens are engaging with politics. For instance, digital technologies are multiplying and accelerating outreach, discussion and engagement with and between citizens. They are creating a new type of social fabric and a fertile ground for the spread of a wide variety of 'non-establishment' stakeholders and networks. A wide range of instruments are being developed and tested aimed at facilitating feedback loops, enabling citizens to submit ideas, scrutinise proposals, monitor actions, or even co-develop policies, thereby sharing ownership of policy decisions with the community that is most affected by them. The main messages or sources of support for populist parties could be taken over by other forms of political participation and democratic innovations.

This obliges populist parties either to adapt, or to find themselves overtaken by these developments.

### **What impact on the EU?**

In response to these changes, administrations at different levels are increasingly looking to harness digitisation and other forms of public innovation to better engage with the 'silent majority' of citizens outside the framework of elections, while maintaining a balance between representative democracy and direct democracy. The EU will need to be part of this process.

The emphasis on identity or nationalist considerations could be overtaken by other priorities such as climate challenges that trigger new forms of mobilisation or politics. This could have a deep impact on the ability of institutions to deliver as 'Climate change actions in democracies face perceived challenges such as short-term bias in decision-making, policy capture or inconsistency, weak accountability mechanisms and the permeability of the policy-making process to interests adverse to fighting climate change through the role of money in politics.'<sup>79</sup> This could lead to an increase of different citizen engagement and new initiatives from the institutions to interact with these movements.

## **Conclusion**

These scenarios are based on ongoing trends, and some elements of each are likely to be a feature of Europe's future. They help understand a set of dynamics which are already having a profound effect on the nature of politics and which present significant risks for the quality and stability of democratic life and institutions.

There is no simple answer to these developments. Addressing the challenges raised by populism will require a multi-layered response that takes into account all the conditions which contribute to its emergence, including underlying factors such as socio-economic polarisation. In the face of pressure from populists, mainstream political parties might be tempted to copy populist policies and methods, taking a leaf out of their playbook. A key challenge for these parties will be to learn from the success of populists, but avoid selling their souls in the process.

The issues raised and used by populist forces are very real, and are often an expression of profound frustration on the part of certain sections of society. Mainstream political parties and institutions will probably need to respond to these same issues by shifting to a more inclusive political narrative that puts emphasis on a shared identity based on common civic values. This would help re-focus the debate away from the divisive and polarising issues favoured by populist parties, thereby depriving them of their political relevance.

This will require a recognition that populist movements have been responding to a real gap in the political representation of citizens, and that mainstream parties now have to fill that gap. It will be up to established political actors to increase the representation of the system in order to stem, and in the longer term reduce, a radicalisation of the disaffected and an erosion of the legitimacy of the system.

This may call for different communication strategies, including for example increased efforts by EU leaders to engage the public through national channels and to break out of the 'Brussels bubble'<sup>80</sup>. This means reaching out and listening more closely to the concerns of citizens at party and institution level, including those who have chosen historically not to participate in elections. Traditional party structures do not necessarily lend themselves to this sort of approach.

Populists have shown that they are adept at identifying and exploiting issues that citizens care about. Innovative participatory democracy tools and deliberative democracy initiatives are



helpful in combatting this, but ensuring a sufficiently large enough reach remains a challenge. For the younger generations investment in civic education will be crucial in order to encourage soft skills such as critical thinking and media literacy, which are key to democratic participation.

Under any scenario, it is particularly important for political leaders from all sides of the spectrum to maintain open channels for dialogue. It is vital to avoid a hollowing out of key institutions and the democratic structure. If institutions are no longer resilient, and their independence and credibility becomes eroded, elections will cease to be a credible tool for reflecting the shared aspirations of society and delivering inclusive policies as part of a common good.

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narratives: 'Continued Growth', 'Collapse', 'Discipline' and 'Transformation'. The Manoa School method to explore the future of a particular issue or phenomenon consists in building comprehensive (and often global) societal scenarios for each of the four archetypal narratives, and then to describe the characteristics that the issue or phenomenon under consideration would assume in each scenario. For example, the Manoa School might ask 'what would populism look like in a context of continued global socio-economic growth? And what would it look like in case of a future global societal collapse?' The approach followed in this paper differs from the Manoa School method insofar as the four archetypal narratives have not been applied to generic global societal futures, but rather to the future of populism itself. The four archetypes have thus been used as brainstorming prompts to imagine the four scenarios described in this paper. For further description of the Manoa School method, see Sohail Inayatullah, 'Six pillars: futures thinking for transforming', *Foresight*, 2008, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 16-17. For a practical example of the application of the Manoa School approach, see David N. Bengston, Jim Dator, Michael J. Dockry and Aubrey Yee, 'Alternative futures for forest-based nanomaterials: an application of the Manoa School's alternative futures method', *World Futures Review*, 2016, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 197-221.

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