

Q2 2016



POPULISM REPORT

APRIL-JUNE 2016

POLICYSOLUTIONS



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



The state of populism in Q2 2016

In the second quarter of 2016, most of the populist parties in Europe still stand at the same level of support as in the previous quarter. Their popularity has remained unchanged or modified only within the margin of error for standard polls. The trends of the first quarter of the year continued: the increase of the populists' support has halted; which fact is a significant difference compared to the surge of populist parties we could observe in the previous years. However, there are a few important exceptions, where a major increase was registered in this period. Two of them - the Law and Justice (Poland) and Fidesz (Hungary) - are already in governing position at the moment, while another two - the Freedom Party (Austria) and the Five Star Movement (Italy) - may win elections in the upcoming years.

In the second quarter of the year, one of the biggest challenges for the European leaders and the European institutions was the referendum on the UK's EU membership. This issue, of course, was one of the hot topics for populist parties too. Most of the Eurosceptic populist parties have been campaigning for Brexit for months, and thus they rejoiced the results. At the moment, some of them have already started to campaign for their own national referendum on EU membership, like the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands or the National Front in France. Others - the Sweden Democrats or the Jobbik in Hungary, for example - are formally not against EU membership, however, they still call for some kind of renegotiation with the EU institutions alike. Meanwhile, the Five Star Movement in Italy proposed a referendum on whether to keep the euro or leave the Eurozone.

False fever of exits?

The unchanged state of populism at the time of Brexit

Policy Solutions analysed the most recent opinion polls (between April and June 2016) in all EU Member States and concluded that the position of the populist parties has not changed significantly compared with the *last period*. Even the most important rightwing populist parties didn't manage to increase their popularity above the margin of error.

The **National Front in France**, which is maybe the loudest pro-Brexit far right populist party across the continent, did not grow its popularity in the second quarter of the year. Even if Marine Le Pen was one of the first ones who applauded the UK's decision to leave the EU and called for a same referendum on 'Frexit', at the moment it does not seem that she could translate this message into new votes. However, despite the fact that the Frexit campaign has not succeeded yet, she personally is still the most supported candidate with the 28 % of the votes.

Other supporters of Brexit could not benefit significantly from their anti-EU campaigns either. Most of them managed to grow their support only within the margin of error for polls. Neither the **Belgian Flemish Interest** (+2%), nor the **Danish People's Party** (+0.30%) grew significantly, and the same applies to the **Finn's Party**

(+0.60%), the **Sweden Democrats** (+1.50%) and the party of Geert Wilders, the **Party for Freedom** in the Netherlands (+0.10%). The German **Alternative for Germany (AFD)**, after a period of growth, stopped its rise in this quarter, and fell two percentage points to 11% at the beginning of June. The drop in support for the AFD may have been caused by the internal conflicts and struggles that even led to a split within the party in July. Last but not least, even **UKIP**, the main British campaigner for Brexit gained only 2 percentage points after the referendum in the end of June, currently having 17% of the votes.

However, the gains and losses of these parties are all within the margin of error. It implies that their efforts to use Brexit to increase their number of supporters have been unsuccessful so far. Still, even if they couldn't grow significantly during the Brexit campaign, their position is still very strong at the country levels.

Looking at the eastern side of Europe similar figures have been recorded for most of the populists in this period. The Slovakian rightwing populist parties stopped growing. Regarding these parties' separate level of support, we can observe that the most openly fascist **Kotleba** (+0.86%) and the party called **We are Family** (-0.73%) have both stagnated, while the **Slovak National Party** (+2.6%) had a modest increase. The popularity of the **Ordinary People** slightly decreased at the same time (-2.23%). The situation in other eastern European countries is similar: The Bulgarian **Attack** party currently has 2.40 percentage points, after a drop with 1.50%, while the Hungarian **Jobbik** also fell to 15% from 18%.

Observing the left-side of the populist scene, the majority of these parties' support did not change in most cases either. The changes remained within the polls' margin of error - like in the case of **Akel** in Cyprus (+3%), the **Czech Communist Party** (-2.5%), the **Left** in Germany (+1%), the **United Left** in Slovenia (-2.80%) or the **Left Block** in Portugal (+0.20%).

Maybe the most unexpected performance among leftwing populists was the one of the **Podemos** (Unidos Podemos) in the last Spanish election in June. The party, despite its continuous growth in the last years, gained only 21.10% of the votes, which is just 0.20 percentage points more than its level of popularity as of **Q1 2016**. However, Podemos is still one of the most successful populist parties in Europe.

Above the margin of error: The real changes

Based on the polls conducted between April and June 2016, Bulgaria is the country where the support for populists has plunged the most (-16%). Although the governing party **GERB** is still the most supported one among the likely voters, the decreasing tendency, which started in the first quarter of the year, has been continuing. The party is currently supported by the 26.50% of the voters, which is an 11.1 percentage points decrease compared to the previous quarter year. The corruption scandals, the recent resignation of the smaller supporter partner **Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV)** from the government as well as the current debates and outcry among the proposed changes of the Electoral Code likely contributed to this relatively big loss of GERB's popularity. Although not at the same extent, the popularity of the **Patriotic Front (PF)**, the smaller supporter of the government also fell slightly with 2.50 percentage points to 4.50%.

The other governing populist party, which significantly lost support in this period is the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (**Syriza**), which currently has 20% of the votes, after a 7.10 points decrease since last quarter.

Syriza's smaller coalition partner **ANEL** did not manage to increase its support either (-0.30%). The harsh decline of Syriza is likely a consequence of the finally implemented austerity measures that the government had previously rejected. Hence, it is no surprise that the far right **Golden Dawn** has increased its level of support at the same time (+2.60%), currently standing at 9.90%. The support of the party is now even bigger than it was during the EP elections in 2014. As other far right European populists, Golden Dawn also rejoiced the decision of the British people and called for a same referendum in Greece, which may bring some more voters to the party in the short-term as well.

Among all the populist parties we tracked in Europe, there were only four who managed to increase their levels of support with more than 3 percentage points in this quarter of the year. Out of these parties, two are the main governing parties of their country, the Hungarian **Fidesz** and the Polish **Law and Justice**, and two other parties are in opposition: the current most popular Italian party, the **Five Star Movement** and the Austrian **Freedom Party**.

At the moment, the two most supported populist parties in Europe are Fidesz and Law and Justice in Hungary and Poland, respectively. Fidesz was able to gain 6 additional percentage points of votes in May compared to the previous period. The Polish Law and Justice is also still riding high at the polls: they received 11.30 percentage points plus in May after more than a half year in power. The two parties have a quite similar technique whilst in government: they try to limit the system of checks and balances and use a strong Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. It seems that the two governing parties have been able to echo the needs of their electorates with this politics as recent surveys among European and US voters show increasing xenophobia tendencies. Based on the opinion poll results we can see that Hungarian and Polish people are the most likely to agree with the statement that refugees increase the possibility of terrorism in their countries and take their jobs and social benefits - even despite the fact that there are actually very few refugees in these countries at the moment.

The recent polls show that currently Five Star Movement is the party with most public support in Italy. The party is favoured by 30.60% of the likely voters, which is a 4.10 percentage points growth when compared to the *last quarter of the year*. The growing approval of the Five Star Movement was clearly reflected at the recent local elections whereby several candidates of the party were elected as mayors in major cities like Rome and Turin. The Five Star Movement less openly supported Brexit than the other Italian rightwing populist party, the **Northern League**, which had heavily campaigned before the British referendum and criticized Brussels intensively. Still, the latter actually did not manage to increase its support (-0.60%) in this period, which may lead to the conclusion that the Brexit campaign was not a beneficial choice for them.

Finally, in this quarter we can find the Austrian **Freedom Party** (FPÖ) also on the winning side. The party's candidate Norbert Hofer was supported by 37% after the presidential election in May - up from 33% and neck by neck with the (formally independent) Green candidate Van der Bellen. Although Van der Bellen narrowly won the presidential election, the voting has to be repeated in October due to irregularities in the count of the votes. Therefore, Hofer has another chance to win this time and also to be the first far right president in the history of the EU.

Conclusion: Stabilization is not a decline

At the second quarter of 2016, apart from the ongoing refugee crises the main topic of discourse for many populist parties was the British referendum and its outcome. The majority of these parties have tried somehow to take advantage of Brexit and called for national referendums with more or less intensity. However, they could not really resort to the British decision and translate it into more votes. Still, as recent polls recorded, the citizens of some European countries would agree with at least some renegotiation of their EU membership, which can boost populists support to take down this route and demand referendums for their own 'Exits' and gain support in the mediate-term.

However, as we could see above, the state of populism in Europe has not changed dramatically since the first quarter of the year. Still, this stagnation does not mean less popularity, but quite the contrary, as in many cases populist parties have managed to stabilize themselves at the second or third position in their respective countries. Moreover, there are some cases (like the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice), where the populist governing parties were able to further increase their support in this period.

However, there are two other populist governments that significantly lost support, namely the Bulgarian GERB-led government and the Syriza-led Greek government. Finally, we have to mention those remarkable winners of this period that recently managed to become the most popular party in their countries: The Austrian Freedom Party and the Italian Five Star Movement.

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*Published with the financial support
of the European Parliament.*

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