

Q3 2016



POPULISM REPORT

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2016

The state of populism in the early autumn of 2016: All quiet on the Western front

During the customarily politically calm summer period - apart from a few striking exceptions - there has been no significant change in the support of populist parties across Europe. Thus, in the third quarter of 2016, the trend of previous periods has continued with the support of populist parties halting in growth, reaching their apparent pinnacle. In most member states, the popularity of non-mainstream parties has continued to either stagnate or fluctuate to a degree that has not exceeded the margin of error. Only in five EU member states out of the 28 did we register a change in the overall social support of populists that has surpassed the margin of error.

A general trend of stagnation in 'older' member states

The general trend throughout Europe, and particularly in western Europe, during the third quarter of the year has been that of a standstill. The social base of non-mainstream political forces in the EU's most populous countries has **remained virtually unchanged as the support of populist parties has kept stagnating in Germany, France, Italy, as well as in Spain.** In early September, **Germany's anti-immigrant AfD achieved a historic success** on a north-eastern provincial election by surpassing Angela Merkel's Christian-democratic CDU for the first time by winning over 20% of the votes cast. However, this achievement should not suggest the national breakthrough of the right-wing populist party as, compared to the second quarter, its support has increased only by one percentage point within the margin of error, making it currently stand at 12%. During the same period, the left-wing **Die Linke has demonstrated a shift similar volume, but opposite in its direction,** keeping the joint support of populists at 21%, at the exact same level as during the previous quarter.

The same holds true for France, with the difference that 2017-election-hopeful **Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front, currently stagnating at 28%, is still the most popular party** among the French electorate, while smaller populist organizations, similarly to those in Germany, have managed to fluctuate just within the margin of error of 1-1.5% compared to the second quarter.

In Italy, the situation has not changed much either, with the most significant shift being the **halving of the right-wing National Alliance's former 5% base,** which, however, had not been too significant before either. At the same time, the support of the socially more embedded Five Star Movement, similarly to other Western-European populist parties, has stagnated. Nevertheless, **with a 30 percent-strong base, the Five Star Movement has remained one of the dominant players in Italian politics.**

The state of leftwing populism with strong positions in southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece has not changed either during the third quarter of 2016. **In Spain, Podemos still enjoys the support of one fifth of the likely voters,** ranking it third in the country's party competition. In Portugal too, the support

of the two leftwing populist parties challenging the government has basically remained the same. Accordingly, if an election would take place today, **the Portuguese Left Block would get 10%, while the Unitary Democratic Coalition 8% of the popular vote.** The party preference in **Greece has also been characterized by summer calm**, with governing **Syriza remaining the most significant populist party with its popularity standing at 20%**, just like in the previous quarter.

In Ireland, the voter base of the left-wing Sinn Fein stagnated at a stable 15% during the summer, while the Anti-Austerity Alliance had a mere 1 percentage point loss of support (4% in Q3), thus the position of left-wing populists has remained stable and decisive in the island country.

In the Scandinavian countries the support of populists has seem to have frozen too. The most noteworthy shift was registered in Finland, albeit still within the 1-2% margin of error, keeping both **the governing rightwing Finns Party's and the leftwing populist Left Alliance's support head-to-head at a 9.5% rate.** Meanwhile in Sweden the gap between left and right-wing populist parties has widened - albeit not to a very significant degree - in favour of the **rightwing Sweden Democrats, which currently enjoys 18%** of the popular vote against the Left Party's 7.3% base. In Denmark, the rightwing **Danish People's Party can expect the support of one fifth of likely voters**, just like it did three months ago. In a like manner to northern countries, the Belgian far-right force Vlaams Belang's base, similarly to the previous quarter, has remained stable at 13-14%.

Despite the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, **the base of populist parties during the summer shifted only within the margin of error in Austria, the Netherlands, and also further to the east in Croatia and Lithuania.** While according to surveys **the Austrian FPÖ has lost 2 percentage points of votes, its current standing at 35% still makes it stably the strongest of all Austrian parties**, with its far-right candidate having a realistic chance to win the upcoming presidential election.

In the Netherlands the alike far-right **Party for Freedom, even despite experiencing a popularity loss of nearly 3%, still remains the second most popular political force** in the Netherlands' multi-party political structure with a base of 15.5%. According to current projection, echoing the surveys of the previous quarter, **Croatian populist parties are expected to share an estimated support of 11-12% on the September elections.** In **Lithuania**, less than one month before the parliamentary elections, **the support of the three ideologically differing populist forces has decreased** within the margin of error, with an overall decline of 2.5 percentage points.

More significant changes in the East and in the United Kingdom

In contrast to the stagnating tendencies characteristic of older member states of the EU, some countries have demonstrated a significant shift of preference in favour of populist parties. **The major changes during the third quarter have been primarily recorded in the EU's eastern, relatively recently acceded countries.** While in the light of second and third quarter surveys in the EU's western, continental and older member states' social base of populist parties seem to have consolidated, the same forces in eastern and newer member countries, as well as in the United Kingdom have displayed signs of alteration of their base during the summer. The collective support of populists in the post-Brexit United Kingdom, Cyprus after the spring elections, in the "Eastern Bloc"

country of Latvia and, among the V4 countries, Poland and Slovakia has increased quite significantly, over three percentage points rate. The shifts are similar in volume, but differ in their directions. **The joint strength of populists has weakened in the United Kingdom and Poland** but has **grown in Cyprus, Lithuania and Slovakia**. This also means that the V4 countries, cooperating against the EU they strongly oppose on migration, have not managed to garner more voters with their anti-migrant campaigns. The close result of the UK referendum, however, had a somewhat **sobering effect on British voters resulting for euroskeptic UKIP the loss of 4 percentage points of their support (13% in Q3)**, with its leader Nigel Farage leaving the party helm just after the successfully achieving his party's primary campaign aim.

In Cyprus, **the communist AKEL, coming in second on the spring elections**, has witnessed a significant bump in support – according to the most recent polls, 30% of Cypriot voters would choose them, suggesting a 4.3 percentage points increase compared to the left-wing party's degree of support on the May elections. The only populist force that displayed an ever greater increase in support was the Latvian LNKK.

In the central European member states, only the support of governing populist parties has changed to a significant degree, suggesting that not only the demand for a populist stance, but also the quality of governance has significant impact on their level of approval. Three of such governing populist parties have experienced a shift in popularity compared to the previous quarter: Latvia's For Fatherland and Freedom, the Slovak National Party and the Polish Law and Justice.

In the whole EU, **Latvia has seen the most significant restructuring of populist parties**. The third quarter has had the greatest lunge in the support of populist forces, gaining an overall of almost **6 percentage points increase in their support**, meaning that if there was an election today, one in every four Latvian voters would cast their vote for a populist party. The large increase of the populists' share can largely be accounted to the governing For Fatherland and Freedom's stride from 10 to 15%. Contrarily, the other two parties, For Latvia from the Heart and Who owns the state?, first running in the spring, showed signs of stagnation.

Among the V4 countries, only in Slovakia have we witnessed an increase of the populists' base worthy of note. However, the some 5 percentage points plunge has not been achieved by a single party but have been added up by the within-the-margin-of-error fluctuation of multiple rightwing populist organizations. Here too, **the most significant change has been recorded by coalition governing Slovak National Party**, as the radical right-wing group has strengthened by 3 percentage points to 14% in the past months. The identically rightwing, albeit not radical OĽaNO and We Are Family has had a minimal expansion, while the radical rightwing Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia's approval has not changed at all. Therefore, Slovakia's populists have managed to stabilize their base 6 months after the parliamentary elections.

By contrast, **in Poland the support of the populist governing force Law and Justice has weakened by 4 percentage point**, resulting in an overall 10% loss of their voters, putting PiS currently at 41%. The drop of support of Poland's governing party has been the biggest among European parties, **making PiS the major loser of the third quarter among populists**.

A prime role-model for Poland's populists, Hungary's governing Fidesz, that were in the midst of intensively campaigning for their October anti-immigrant referendum, has made only a slight one percentage point gain during the summer. However, despite the stagnation, the Hungarian governing party's social embeddedness is still exceptionally strong with **nearly fifty percent of likely voters standing behind Viktor Orbán**, who also became one of the leaders of the anti-migration populist forces in Europe. As an overwhelming majority of

the Hungarian population supports the government's position on migration, Fidesz's stagnation could be best explained by the politically inactive summer period. Meanwhile, the far right Jobbik were not able to managed to profit of the anti-migrant political environment as the party could increase its popularity with a mere 1 percentage point. Overall, however, the share of **Hungarians supportive of populist parties has increased by 2.5 percentage points**, adding up to two-thirds of the electorate, **making it the highest among the EU's member states**.

In the Czech party system, having both rightwing and leftwing populist parties, the non-mainstream organizations' bases have had only a minimal shift. While the rightwing Party of Free Citizens has registered a modest 2.5 percentage points decrease, on the other side of the political spectrum the Czech communists have had a 2 percentage points surge. The other three rightwing populist parties, **the governing ANO (30%) and Úsvit (3%)** – the latter means Dawn in English - **have expanded their bases well within the margin of error by 1 percentage point, respectively**, while Freedom and Direct Democracy (4%) has not displayed any change in the polls.

Bulgaria's governing GERB could not significantly expand its base either. Albeit their current support is just 1 percentage point higher than it was a few months ago, Bulgaria's governing party's support still proves firm and strong – what is more, it stands even slightly higher than as recorded at the beginning of the year. GERB, during both the first and second quarters, had a support base of around 40% - with its present support of 42% the party has been ranking second among Europe's populists after PiS's major decline.

Summary

With the support of European populist parties at a standstill, this year's general trend has continued during summer months too. However, their decelerating expansion across Europe is at best a neutral, and in no way a positive development. According to opinion polls, it seems that populist forces have managed to stabilize and consolidate their support base. While in a number of EU member states the support of populist parties is already significant, in a number of other countries, such as Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Austria, they even amount to the most popular political forces or are aspiring to achieving it. Even though in some countries we have witnessed a decrease in demand for populists, this trend has been most typical - besides the Brits facing post-Brexit realities - only in Poland, where the degree of support for populists was high enough already. In turn, the examples of Latvia, Cyprus and Slovakia are a warning sign that European populists are capable of further expansion. It can also be instructive that according to these findings, excessive anti-migrant campaigns do not necessarily lead to an expanding voter base, as among the V4 countries only Slovakia has seen a significant increase in support for populist forces during the third quarter.

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