



**IN THE NAME OF  
THE PEOPLE:  
THE PERFORMANCE OF THE GOVERNING  
POPULIST PARTIES IN EUROPE**

# The performance of the governing populist parties in Europe

The rise of the populist parties has become a worldwide phenomenon, and a growing issue in the *European Union as well*. Out of the 28 member states, 26 countries have at least one populist party in their respective national parliament, and in 9 countries populists are currently in the government either as the major governing party or as coalition partner. Hence, a common assumption, namely that "populists have strong voice in opposition, but they are unable to govern" hardly can be held anymore. It seems that they are doing well in government, or at least some of them.

In the followings, we will overview the performance of those four populist parties in the EU that won national elections in the last few years and now are the ruling parties in their countries.

Out of the four populist parties that won general elections in the last few years, two parties formed majority governments: Fidesz-KDNP in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland. However, in Greece and Bulgaria a coalition or partnership agreement between a bigger and a smaller populist party was concluded, namely between the Syriza and the Independent Greeks, and between the Bulgarian governing GERB and the Patriotic Front. Let's see them one by one!

## Fidesz - Hungary

Looking at the *Populism graph* one can see that the 'winner' among EU member states regarding the demand for populist parties is, undoubtedly, Hungary. Hungary has been leading our 'populism ranking' for two years, as 72% and 68% of the Hungarians supported populist parties in 2015 and 2016, respectively. The absolute winner is also the Hungarian rightwing ruling party Fidesz, whose enduring popularity was the second highest among European populist parties in 2015 and the *highest in 2016*. The governance of the populist Fidesz-KDNP can be described as anything, but inactive in the last six years since Fidesz is in power. The populist rhetoric and measures of Viktor Orbán's government have even become harsher by years. In its first four years in power, using its two-third parliamentary majority the Orbán-government changed the *Constitution*, introduced a new media law, which *basically reduced the guarantees of free press* and continuously implemented measures that led to the destruction of the *system of constitutional checks and balances*. According to the Fidesz-KDNP rhetoric Hungarian people have to be protected against internal and external dangers. The domestic dangers include the leftist and liberal parties, intellectuals, the NGO sector and, as a usual suspect, George Soros. The outside enemies are the international companies and the bank sector, which *were also hit by new laws*, but first and foremost Brussels, the European Union that the government carries *on a freedom fight against* in the name of the Hungarian people.

Viktor Orbán's most recent field of battle is the European refugee crisis. Fidesz-KDNP with its strong rightwing populist rhetoric has been able to benefit from the refugee crisis from its very beginning, actually even before it started. '*National consultation*' and a billboard campaign against migrants were launched in order to express the clear message that the government rejects immigration. The explicit xenophobic rhetoric *helped Fidesz to take votes from the far right party Jobbik* and also to lay down the basis of subsequent measures against refugees. The most symbolic sign of the 'protection of the Hungarians' is the razor-wire fence at the southern border of the country built by the government.

## GERB - Bulgaria

Similar measures are taking place in the second country on the populist graph, which is Bulgaria. The majority of the populist votes goes to the ruling party called Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). It was the most successful populist party in Europe in 2015, supported by 52% of the Bulgarians – which level of support actually decreased to 38% in 2016 placing the party to the second position after Fidesz in the European list of populist parties. Patriotic Front, the smaller rightwing populist partner of GERB has 7% of the votes, thereby all together the governing populist parties are supported by the 45% of the likely voters. GERB also uses strong populist rhetoric, which is characterized by the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them'. Like in Hungary, Bulgarians also 'have to be protected' from the members of the corrupted previous government, who are against the Bulgarian people by a charismatic leader.

Until recently, GERB was governing in a coalition with its smaller partner Reformist Bloc (RB), with the support of the Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV) and another rightwing populist party Patriotic Front (PF). However, ABV has resigned the partnership agreement, which **left the government in a thin majority position**. Although the direct link is not unequivocal, the decision of the leftwing party is likely connected to the current debates on the electoral code. The **changes** of the Election Code proposed by PF would limit the voting rights of citizens living abroad, which basically aimed to reduce the electoral basis of Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) among Bulgarians living in Turkey. The amendment was passed, but after huge demonstrations in Bulgaria and abroad it was **vetoed by the president**.

Another sign of the strong presence of the smaller populist party PF is a **submitted bill** to ban the niqab in a southern Bulgarian city called Pazardjik. According to the party the bill was motivated by the terrorist attacks in Europe and 'the increasing flow of migrants who entered the country in the past few years'. However, regarding the fact that there is no actual migrant problem in Bulgaria, the law actually concerned the inhabitant Muslim community of the country, who live there for hundred years. Furthermore, the strong linkage between the Patriotic Front and the Bulgarian far right, including **direct connections with the far right party Attack** could push the government even more to the far right in the future.

## PiS - Poland

While the unstable position of GERB might lead to snap elections in Bulgaria, the Polish Law and Justice (PiS), the third most supported populist party in Europe, apparently does not need strong campaign to stabilize its power in the near future. It won the Polish elections with 38% of the votes in 2015, and thus it was able to create a majority government. PiS is still supported by 34% of the Polish population in 2016. The populist government, like its Hungarian peer, has introduced a bunch of controversial laws and amendments since it is in power. But not only the tempo is the same with the Orbán cabinet, but the introduced measures are similar too. From the **new media** law which made the state media controlled by the treasury minister, through the **new taxes for banks and insurance companies and then the proposed bill against supermarkets**, across a **new law**, which makes more difficult to buy farmland for foreigners to the reforms of the judicial system every act makes the comparison with Fidesz-KDNP government even more relevant. The most infamous **recent action** of the PiS is the amendments of the law that specifies the work of the constitutional tribunal, caused by the 'problematic situation' of five judges who were elected by the previous government. The new law predicts that

every decision of the tribunal has to be made with two-third majority instead of the previous method of simple majority. This amendment was found unconstitutional by the tribunal, but the government refused to publish it, which led to the present constitutional crisis. In the current rhetoric of the Polish government the Court, the **Venice Commission** and the European Parliament, who called upon the government to accept the verdict of the tribunal, and even the protesters who demonstrate against the changes of the law and other related issues of democracy are seen as 'enemies' who hinder to undertake real changes 'for the people'. These changes that the populist government aims are mostly such social reforms that support families with children especially the lower classes like the program called **'Family 500 plus'**. While PiS is promoting families, it strongly rejects gender related issues with the strong support and influence of the Catholic Church. Among other actions, the new government **vetoed** the Gender Accordance Act, so it could not enter into force, and proposed a new law that would completely ban abortion. As a result of the **mass protests** against it, the measure was finally withdrawn.

Refugees are also considered as enemies by PiS. PiS' rhetoric is similar to that of other populist rightwing parties: 'Migrants would **bring disease** into Europe'; 'there is **no place** for them in the labor market'; and, first and foremost, 'they are potential terrorists'. Consequently, PiS cabinet refuses to take in the 7000 refugees that the previous government accepted. Furthermore, a new **anti-terrorism bill** was also adopted by the governing party following the Hungarian pattern.

## Syriza - Greece

47.8% of the Greek population supported populist parties in 2016, which was even higher in the previous year when more than half of the population did so. The majority of the support goes to the governing Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) led by the prime minister Alexis Tsipras, who formed his second cabinet with the small rightwing party Independent Greeks (ANEL) in 2015. Syriza is an example how a leftwing populist party works in power.

What differs left-wing populism from its right-wing peer is the lack of exclusionary definition of people **regarding their sexual orientation or ethnic origin**. Thereby, it fits the type of '**inclusionary populism**' by Mudde and Kaltwasser. Syriza, for example, declares equal rights of immigrants in their law presented about the citizenship **for stateless children**. Another clear illustration of the inclusionary politics of Syriza was the **legalization of the LGBT couples**. However, both measures were opposed by the smaller rightist coalition partner ANEL.

Another leftist characteristic that differs Syriza from the rightist populists is its state **secularization efforts** and the promise of normalizing the military expenditures. However, there are no significant signs of changes on these issues yet, which fact is strongly connected to the well-embeddedness of these organizations into the Greek society. Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons why these progressive efforts cannot be carried out is the 'inside opposition' within the government, namely ANEL.

The common point of the leftwing and rightwing populism is the division between 'us' versus 'them', which is articulated around the 'people' (us) who are the underdog, oppressed by those who are in power. It is a **basic point** of the Syriza's rhetoric as well: 'people' suffers from austerity and 'others' dictate and implement these measures. One part of these forces is inside the country, namely the established parties who ruled Greece previously. The other part of the 'enemy' is the '**external troika**', the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

However, apparently Syriza failed to fulfill its populist promises. Although, in a referendum proposed by Syriza Greeks rejected the European austerity measures, the government later accepted the bailout package, which comprised even worse conditions for Greece than the previous version. After a snap election won by Syriza again, the leftwing party formed a coalition with ANEL again and **implemented** austerity measures that were rejected before - even in a more painful way. The new austerity measures resulted in the **decreased support of Syriza**, the growing popularity of its main rival, the mainstream rightwing player New Democracy, and the newborn **protest movements** against the government.

**In this article we examined the most popular populist governments in Europe. A textbook example how populist rhetoric is implemented into actions is the Fidesz-KDNP government in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland. With their majority in the parliament and due to the lack of real opposition, they have an easy road to create 'illiberal democracy' in their respective countries. The international pressure on these governments could be an obstacle for them, however, it does not seem to be strong enough to stop either Fidesz or PiS. The Syriza-led Greek government is a different case as the conflicts with the smaller coalition partner ANEL and the international pressure made the government and the Greek society awake from their populist dreams. In Bulgaria the GERB-led government is in a state of uncertainty as the smaller coalition partner has strong impact on the government and pushes GERB even more to the direction of the populist right.**

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