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THE STATE OF EUROPEAN POPULISM IN Q4 2016

POLICYSOLUTIONS



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
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Summary

In the light of the last few months' election results, it can be stated that the power of populism in government has expanded. The most important of these events is the populist turn of the USA. Donald Trump's administration could be an important external ally for euroskeptic and anti-migration European populists in their conflicts with EU over the next four years. Trump's victory can boost the campaigns of those European right wing populists, who are preparing for victories in 2017. The tight result of the Austrian presidential election is also a warning to the growing challenge of far-right populism. The electoral success of Lithuanian and Romanian populists also indicates the increasing demand of populism against mainstream parties: in these Member States, the non-conventional parties were not relevant previously. On the other hand, it draws attention to the diversity of European populism, and it can be concluded that the only common characteristic of these organizations is the anti-establishment attitude. The rise of the Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union and the Save Romania Union represents not only the demand for left or right wing populism, but also for a kind of 'third way populism'. It is not necessarily radicalism or anti-EU position which makes them popular. They rather focus on specific issues of the country that mainstream parties couldn't resolve.

While the election results indicate growing political influence of populists in certain member states and in the US, in turn, stagnation and moderate decrease characterised the EU on the level of Member States. It can be observed that political sympathy for populists has generally declined in those countries, where these powers are already deeply embedded in society: in France, Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia. The greatest shift happened also in the country where populism has the most support, Hungary. In many cases, it was basically the high level of populism which was mildly moderated, thus, despite these drops, in these countries we couldn't witness the total disappearance of populism.

I. Relevant political events related to European populism

There were several considerable events related to populism in the last three months of 2016 – and **the most important of them, of course, was Donald Trump's surprising US election victory**. Although, it's not about an EU member state, the **populist turn of this great power** will definitely have a strong impact on the European Union's future. **The new US President and the European radical or right-wing populist parties agree or have similar positions on several topics**. Anti-globalisation, economic protectionism, euroscepticism,

anti-migration attitude, friendship with Russia and opposing liberalism are all hot issues for the European populists too. **These parties have found an influential ally in Donald Trump: it is no coincidence that the leaders of European far-right, such as Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders and others welcomed Trump's win with great enthusiasm.**

However, not only did the U.S. provide political events to be closely watched, but EU Member States as well. **By holding the previously postponed second round in early December, the protracted presidential election in Austria had concluded.** The stakes were high between the two candidates supported by non-mainstream parties (Alexander Van der Bellen, backed by The Greens and FPÖ's Norbert Hofer): whether an EU member state elect a far-right president for the first time in recent history. **The competition wasn't as close as it was expected before: Van der Bellen won the presidency by 54% of votes vis-à-vis Hofer having 46%.** Despite the failure to win the presidential elections, this result still might be encouraging for Austria's far-right.

Italy's constitutional referendum on Matteo Renzi's initiative was held on the same day as the presidential election in Austria. The PM of the centre-left government had considered the referendum as a vote of confidence, hence after the refusal of his reforms he submitted his resignation which led to a governmental crisis. A potential early election would have given a chance to the populist Five Star Movement, **but the President of Italy asked departing Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni to form a new government, allowing the governing party to stay in power.**

Legislative elections were held in Lithuania in last October, which were won by the agrarian populist Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union (LVŽS). It is the first time when a populist party wins elections in a Baltic country. LVZS received 22.45 percent of the votes and 54 seats in the Parliament, which is an outstanding result considering the fact that the party had had only one MP during the previous parliamentary term. It was primarily the disenchantment with mainstream politics, due to low wages and emigration, that contributed to the victory of the agrarian billionaire, Ramunės Karbauskis' party. LVZS have formed a coalition with centre-left Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, and thus the number of populists in government increased in the European Union.

In December 2016, legislative elections were held in Romania too, where besides the confident win of the social democrats, the moderate populists have also made a significant progress. The **Save Romania Union**, a fresh political group which had transformed into a party from an anti-corruption movement in 2015, **became a significant political actor in the country within one and a half year.** Nicușor Dan activist's party got 9% of votes, the third best result after the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party respectively.

II. Changes in support of populist parties at the end of 2016

In the last quarter of 2016 there were changes only in few countries regarding the aggregated support of populist parties, and we can observe considerable shift only in one or two member states.

Among the 28 member states of EU, only in the Czech Republic and Ireland can be observed that the support of populist parties has increased. Moreover, we see in these countries a growth of 3 percent, which is equal with the margin of error. In the Czech Republic, populist parties enjoy the support of more than half of the voters (54%), but in Ireland the same data is only 22%, which makes the country moderately affected by populism.

However, there are numerous Member States with decreasing support of populism. We can observe the two greatest declines in countries where populist powers are in government. In Poland, the voter base of non-mainstream parties dropped by 8 points during the last three months, hence less than half of the voters (43%) would opt for populists in the country. The support of populists decreased by 6 points in Lithuania too, thus one third of the voters would choose these parties. In Denmark, France, Latvia and Slovakia, populists have experienced a loss of popularity by 4 percentage points. In Finland, Luxembourg and Italy populists lost 3 points, which is within the margin of error.

Populism is still the most supported in Hungary (69%), the Czech Republic (54%), Bulgaria (49%) and France (45%), but Poland dropped from the second place to fifth by its rate of 43%. Further countries having at least 40% support of populists are Greece (42%), Italy (41%), and Cyprus (40%). The least affected countries are Croatia and Romania (10-10%), Belgium and Slovenia (12-12%) and the United Kingdom (14%) in addition to Malta which is still intact from populist parties.

Among the studied populist parties, the support of 14 parties from 10 countries shifted significantly: four of them has increased their popularity, while the support of ten organizations has weakened. The greatest shift of populist electoral base took place in Hungary and Lithuania. The most popular European populist party had the largest growth recently: Hungarian ruling party, Fidesz increased its support by 7%, and get an overall support of 53% of voters. Fidesz is still holding the record regarding the support of European populists. They most likely strengthened at the expense of far-right Jobbik: the other populist party of the country lost one fourth of their voters in three months, an overall decline of 5 percentage points. The Lithuanian left wing Labour Party produced the biggest decline, by falling 6% points and losing half of their voters during the last quarter of 2016. The support of right wing Order and Justice decreased by 3 percentage points during the Lithuanian electoral campaign, while the victorious LVŽS increased its support by 3 percentage points.

Beside the Hungarian and the new Lithuanian ruling party, **the Czech Communist Party and the Dutch far right Party for Freedom noted an increase of popular vote by 4 and 3 percentage points, respectively.** Like Lithuanian Labour Party and Hungarian Jobbik, the **Polish ruling party's (PiS) popularity decreased significantly, by 5 percentage points.** Law and Justice slid back to the 3th place of rank of European populists, behind the second Bulgarian GERB. **The right wing Danish People's Party and the Lithuanian Who Owns The State? had a 4 percentage points loss of support,** and the Dutch Socialist Party had the same setback. In addition, the support of Milan Bandic's party in Croatia, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia and the Lithuanian The Left also decreased by 3 percentage points.



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