



## Thinking Lab on Populism

Policy Brief

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Over the course of the last two years, the Berlin-based think tank Das Progressive Zentrum organised, in cooperation with numerous partner organisations, the trans-European civil society project 'DIALOGUE ON EUROPE'. Within this framework, experts and practitioners from across Europe gathered in four so-called 'Thinking Labs' to deliver fresh ideas and to independently elaborate concrete policy recommendations on four European key areas: Migration & Integration, Populism, Social Cohesion, and Sustainable Growth. The overall project has been supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

## Introduction

### Drastic Shifts in Politics: The Context of our Work

Since the Thinking Lab on Populism started to examine populism and its root causes, drastic shifts have occurred in the political landscape: In 2016, the populist surge peaked with the Brexit referendum and the election of President Trump. It made us wonder whether history had outpaced us. Despite the general fear of populists coming to power in Europe, neither Geert Wilders in the Netherlands nor Marine le Pen in France managed to secure significant positions of power in 2017. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) made it into the Bundestag with almost 13% of the national vote, but it will take some time until they become a force to be considered for government.

This slight return to normalcy after a turbulent 2016 should, however, not make us forget that populism is here to stay. Marine Le Pen, for instance, managed to secure more than 10 million votes, doubling her father's result fifteen years before, and representing an increase of 3 million votes between the first and second rounds of the presidential election in 2017. In Poland and Hungary, right-wing populist parties have established themselves as the strongest political forces in both countries, with the Law & Justice Party (PiS) and Viktor Orban's party Fidesz undermining an independent judiciary, the rule of law and openly violating the EU's fundamental values. In the US, Donald Trump has trivialised white supremacists, implemented a Muslim travel ban and mounted a campaign against the media in his country.

The rise of populist parties thus, increasingly, threatens the separation of power, press freedom as well as minority and women's rights. But this is not only a Western phenomenon. Shinzo Abe in Japan is in the vanguard of a militarist turn in Japan, India has experienced a wave of Hindu nationalism and Rodrigo Duterte's highly contested rule in the Philippines is widely considered a "populist revolt against the elite" (Richard Javad).

Though populists have yet to secure strong positions of power in Western Europe, the root causes of populism have not disappeared. Neither has their attraction in society faded, nor their potential impact on politics diminished. On the contrary – their increased representation in the mainstream of public life, in the party political landscape and in national parliaments threatens to impact the long-term political agenda at different levels.

With this in mind, together with the global dimension of populism, the authors of this paper will, however, mainly focus on populism in Europe in order to narrow down the issue and to develop recommendations more suited to European countries.

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**“Populism cannot be defeated by merely defending the status quo. It requires system-wide transformations.”**

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The main assumption underlying our recommendations is that populism cannot be defeated by merely defending the status quo. Rather, it requires system-wide transformations, alternative paradigms, and new narratives to combat the systemic roots of populism.

## Our Perspective and Working Method: What we can add to the Debate

We are a group of dedicated young thinkers and doers from across Europe. We are a group that met over the course of more than a year, bringing together different cultural, professional and personal perspectives on populism through a European lense. Instead of remaining in the realm of academia, we endeavoured to combine our common knowledge and expertise across think tanks, politics, academia and civil society in order to develop feasible recommendations together. Our group's diversity in nationalities and professions not only made our debates fruitful, but was also an asset when analysing the phenomenon of populism; it mirrored the complexity of the phenomenon itself. On the one hand, populism has roots that are distinctly linked to national narratives and the historical specificities of each country. On the other hand, comparing the emergence of populism across European countries shows that populism often transcends national boundaries. Moreover, whilst populist rhetoric and policies tend to have a national focus, populists are increasingly organising and cooperating on the European stage. Our diverse working group therefore allows the multi-perspective approach that is needed to investigate and address the populist phenomenon in the most comprehensive way possible.

Whilst we hope that a broad audience will read our policy recommendations, we agreed that, above all, the main addressees are those decision-makers and next generation thinkers and doers who are looking for more than just tactical responses to the populist surge. From our perspective, when speaking about populism, we are always, also, speaking about how to reinvent our political system in a way that makes it more adaptive, and in a way which serves and inspires its citizens. For this to happen, broad alliances across societies and across countries are required so that populism can be tackled at its root.

## Populism(s): what does it mean?

“Populism is an enormous, mysterious force, but it is not our future”. This was how René Cupérus, former Director of International Relations at the Wiardi Beckman Foundation and columnist at the Dutch daily newspaper *De Volkskrant*, introduced his thoughts on populism during the last Dialogue on Europe Thinking Lab Summit, held in Rome in October 2017.

Indeed, defining populism was the first challenge we encountered, and a difficult one at that. Early on in the process, we decided to use a pragmatic working definition – knowing that some academics spend years and years trying to define populism. During the working process, we added relevant factors to our definition, which evolved over time and with the new perspectives we created.

René Cuperus identified three tendencies of populism in Europe: predominantly left-wing populism in Southern Europe, mainly illiberal (or even) authoritarian populism in Central and Eastern Europe and preponderantly right-wing populism in Western Europe and Scandinavia. Cas Mudde's and Jan-Werner Müller's definitions of populism also helped us immensely in our endeavour to understand the populist phenomenon in more depth.

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### “Populism as a political style is not necessarily something we need to worry about.”

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One main feature found in various forms of populism is the separation of society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: “the people” versus “the (established) elite”. Populists argue that they represent the general will of the people, often precluding minorities or party political pluralism. Typically, a populist movement involves a charismatic leader who provides guidance to “the people” by addressing their emotions, emphasising their in-group identity and oversimplifying the answers that can be given to complex political and societal problems.

The most important aspect for us was a focus on populist values. We agreed that populism as a political style is not necessarily something we need to worry about. Parties like Podemos in Spain or Die Linke in Germany have strong populist tendencies when it comes to how they communicate – but they are based on pluralist values and support the rule of law and the protection of minorities. On the other hand, parties like Fidesz (Hungary), PiS (Poland), Front National (France), AfD (Germany) or FPÖ (Austria) often oppose these fundamental principles of liberal democracy: the principle of representativity (arguing for direct democracy), the separation of powers, human rights for every human being (including migrants), a free press, etc. Those populist parties aim to weaken the pluralist democracy that has been established over the course of the 20th century across Europe.

According to Harvard scholar Yascha Mounk, “*the political systems of North America and Western Europe are defined by two core components. They are liberal because they seek to guarantee the rights of individuals, including those of marginalised minorities. And they are democratic because their institutions are supposed to translate popular views into public policy.*”<sup>1</sup>

This is why we decided to focus on **illiberal and undemocratic populism**, i.e. the kind of politics that on the one hand attacks liberal, pluralist cultural values and on the other seeks to destroy the representative political system. In addition, we agreed that the lack of democracy – and the emergence of technocracy – in the past decades is one of the main reasons for the rise of populism today. Indeed, voters do not feel like they are represented by decision-makers and thus elect populists who pretend to be the “true representative of the people”. Still, according to Mounk, we now see two new regime forms: “illiberal democracy,” or democracy without rights, and “undemocratic liberalism”. Both are issues that have to be addressed.

In addition, we had to make sure to differentiate populist parties and populist politicians on the one hand, and the citizens voting for populist parties on the other. Whilst populist parties and politicians are convinced of their ideas, voters might not all have the same reasons

1. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-european-populism-technocracy-by-yascha-mounk-1-2016-06>

to vote for populists. Some of them, of course, have an illiberal understanding of democracy, or are simply undemocratic. But others often also vote in protest against the current government, to show their dissatisfaction with the economic situation, or in the hope of a change in the current status quo. Thus, when writing recommendations, we focused mainly on active populist actors and decision-makers, and less on populist voters. That said, democratic parties and decision-makers should make sure to listen to the reasons for the populist vote and should make sure to win them back into the democratic realm.

During the course of our discussions, we agreed that the following three aspects of populism were especially important:

- First, illiberal populism promotes in its core values a certain resistance to economic, societal and cultural change. At the same time, it reflects the lack of responses found by decision-makers to pressing societal issues such as digitisation, globalisation, rapid changes in the labour market or to new migration flows. Many voters struggle with the high speed of often profound changes in society, often expressed through strong opposition to immigration. Beyond the economic and cultural arguments often put forward, populism is also a symptom of the last decades' political environment and the inability of decision-makers to properly tackle political and societal issues. Their promotion of a neoliberal agenda led to the erosion of the welfare state and the spread of precarious employment.

At the same time, the cultural diversification of European societies, increased migration flows and the progress made in terms of gender equality or LGBT rights have not been accepted by parts of the population. Here politicians have failed to provide the tools to explain and make acceptable those societal and cultural changes. Of course populist parties differ tremendously in what they criticise (for instance, some oppose a liberal economy but endorse migration or vice versa). But more often than that populists blame easy scapegoats whilst blatantly passing over the real reasons for the imbalances and issues faced by our societies today. For instance, they

blame immigrants for taking local people's jobs, while it is the globalisation of the economy that is responsible for those changes. Instead of trying to find a solution to better regulate the economy at the EU level – where a significant impact is possible – populists look for easy answers, creating a world painted in black and white.

- Second, the rise of populism is a symptom of a crisis of transformation. As our societies are rapidly developing and changing, going through various crises, populism is one of many symptoms of the shifts in the order of world politics, national politics and society. This transformation poses new challenges to public institutions and political parties which have often reacted and adapted insufficiently to the new developments at the global, national and local levels. This lack of adaptation within societies – and an attendant lack of appropriate decision-making by politicians – has led to the polarisation of society, the (over-)emphasis of inequalities and the emergence of populism.

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### **“Populism is a contestation of the establishment and a clash about future visions of society.”**

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- Third, populism is a contestation of the establishment and a clash about future visions of society, rather than just politics. Thus, in order to fight populism it is necessary to look more closely at the established structures and processes in politics, rather than focusing primarily on the populists themselves.



## Our Approach and Key Findings

During our online and offline meetings, we approached populism from different perspectives, which developed into five key findings:

### 1. LEARNING FROM POPULISTS – LEARNING TO WIN?

First, we asked ourselves what we can learn from populists. Our main finding was that populist players have a strong sense of agency, which means the deep belief that they can change politics and society according to their vision and values. They are confident of their ability to build majorities and to shake up the establishment. Centrist and democratic politicians should learn from this attitude – to develop stronger visions for society and to implement better and bolder policies. They also need to trust more in their ability to deal with complex processes and, above all, remember that majorities are built rather than found. If trust in progress is gone, then progress needs to be reinvented and a sense of confidence in the political discourse needs to be reintroduced.

### 2. THE AGENDA SET BY POPULISTS IS NOT ALWAYS A BAD ONE

Secondly, populism brings to the forefront and places on the agenda issues that large sections of the population care about, but which political elites often avoid discussing – such as immigration or social inequality. Thus established politicians should listen more carefully to citizens' needs and develop a sense of ownership for issues which, today, are being advanced by populists. And, importantly, they need to address them. It should be emphasised that this in no way equates to a 'copy and paste approach' to populist policy proposals on those issues. Rather, established players should develop their ability to quickly take up pressing issues, and to offer solutions to them which are in line with a culturally liberal and pluralist society.

### 3. ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS IN ORDER TO GET THE RIGHT ANSWERS

To make sense of populism, the right questions need to be asked. For instance, populists focus less on what the EU does than on what it represents. Rather than simply asking whether the EU is making people richer or poorer, populists focus on the more fundamental question of "who are we?". This led us to understand that populism needs a response on two levels: Firstly, on the policy level, decision-makers should implement policies that have an impact on issues that matter to citizens, and thus show people that they take their fears seriously and respond to them. Secondly, on a community level, new narratives are needed and, more importantly, new paradigms. These need to help create politics for those who today feel a general sense of discontent and disenfranchisement in the established political system, and for those who often lack representation in the culturally liberal, pluralist spectrum.

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**“Defending the unaltered establishment that has caused populism will not give rise to solutions to populism.”**

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### 4. FIGHTING THE ROOT CAUSES OF POPULISM BY REASSESSING THE ESTABLISHMENT

Beyond fighting populism with short-term measures, its root causes also need to be addressed. Fighting populism means reassessing the established political system which has allowed populism to emerge. Indeed, defending the unaltered nature of the very establishment that has caused and nourished populism will not give rise to solutions to populism. A long, honest and thorough reassessment is needed of what needs to be changed in the current way politics works: the institutions, the processes, the policy areas, the political culture and the media. A new framework for politics in the centre is also needed. The post-war model is no longer up to the task of creating solutions to the systemic problems societies face today.

## 5. TRANSFORMING THE INSTITUTIONS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY TO MAKE THEM MORE CITIZEN-CENTRED

Finally, whoever thinks the populist tide will simply pass should seriously reconsider their position. Populism poses high risks to the very fabric of our societies – risks which need to be taken seriously. Long-term action and solutions are needed. This necessitates the transformation of the institutions of liberal democracy to make sure they serve the people better – and a re-think of broader concepts such as the economic system (with concepts as doughnut economics or the circular economy), democracy (with democratic innovations), or the relationship between religion, spirituality and the state. Only with strong democratic institutions and processes adapted to our societies, will our democracies resist authoritarian, illiberal and populist forces. And only thanks to a positive vision of the future will it be possible to counter populism in the long-term.

## Fighting the Root Causes of illiberal Populism: Nine Recommendations

Illiberal and undemocratic populism is not a challenge that will be solved by simply implementing policy recommendations. It is a systemic phenomenon that requires not only appropriate measures, but also a thorough understanding of its root causes. Those root causes lie hidden in a myriad of policy fields, institutional realities and shortcomings of political communication. It is a symptom of a number of failures of the political establishment in the past, but also of broader societal trends. It also means that a new relationship between citizens and politics needs to be found. This is why we propose to tackle illiberal populism by focusing on its root causes. These root causes arise from the default mode of how mainstream politics works in most European countries, and from often outdated democratic institutions and processes which need reform to serve 21st century societies. Those who hope for quick fixes will have to abandon that hope. Just as it has taken a few decades for illiberal populism to take root in Europe it will take time to eradicate the root causes of it. Moreover, it will require the willingness to move political decision-making beyond the current status quo.

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Ultimately, when we talk about fighting the root causes of illiberal populism, we talk about important changes in the political architecture of Western democracies that need to be implemented:

- the innovation of political institutions that are able to create solutions for the existential problems we face (climate change, digitisation of the labour market, national and global inequality, etc.);

- those changes should be based on the realisation that providing not only a life in material dignity, but also structures which facilitate lifelong development and learning beyond the needs of the job market, is the basic ethical duty of politics in the 21st century;
- the structural facilitation of identity and purpose beyond economic status, wealth and materialism;
- the political realisation that it may be time to focus on how we can equip citizens for permanent change in the light of an ever faster digitalisation, automation and globalisation;
- instead of focusing on the illusion of stability and short-term solutions that undermine public trust even further, an approach based on productive disagreement and a more fruitful political debate.

The following recommendations therefore focus on strategic fields of action, and try to avoid mere short-term answers to the populist tide. We constructed a sort of ‘semantic framework’ for a much-needed revision of the way policy-making processes are implemented in a representative democracy. The definition of practicable policies stemming from these recommendations is an urgent requirement we hope to contribute to with this text, and which is complemented by the policy proposals from the other Thinking Labs in the DIALOGUE ON EUROPE project.

Our recommendations are mainly directed at those in power nowadays, i.e. centre-left and centre-right parties that would like to actively combat populism in the longer term. But they are also directed to every citizen and civil society organisation that wishes to see a future in Europe that is democratic, pluralist and culturally liberal.

## 1. Strengthen democratic Institutions and Decision-Makers

### ROOT CAUSE: LARGELY ACCEPTED PUBLIC DISDAIN FOR ELITES AND INSTITUTIONS

For decades, public opinion and the media have advanced a discourse which criticises democratic institutions for lacking responsiveness to the challenges society faces. Whether left or right, progressive or conservative, young or old – whichever group you look at, you will find broad acceptance for publicly shaming democratic institutions and the political class. Populist parties have used this growing distrust and augmented it with an ‘anti-establishment’ rhetoric; they have made political capital out of the general but genuine frustration of people with the past lack of responses from decision-makers. This general atmosphere of distrust and frustration has made it easy for illiberal populists to denounce the overall legitimacy of established political and economic elites, and to even question the idea of representation itself.

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**“Weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions is the prerequisite for the establishment of illiberal regimes.”**

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### RECOMMENDATION: REBUILD TRUST IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

History shows that weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions and their representatives is the prerequisite for the establishment of illiberal and anti-pluralistic regimes. Thus it is vital to argue more forcefully for the basic idea of representative democracy and to defend its institutions, as well as those elites that populate these institutions. Integrating the sphere of decision-making has to encompass both respect for the interests of society as a whole and the capacity to deliver prospects for a shared future. This includes defending the less desirable aspects of democracy: its slowness, its messiness, the imperfection of how democracy is enacted. This is not about glorifying the past. The argument for the basic ideas of representative democracy can only be made when intertwined with the demand

for institutional reform. Democracy needs to continuously adapt to a changing environment, whilst at the same time finding the right (political) answers to the challenges which arise in that environment. At the EU level, this implies accepting and fostering debate of different positions, as well as reinforcing the democratic accountability of EU decision-making. But first and foremost it means strengthening the roles, power and accountability of directly elected bodies (both national and European parliaments) instead of those which are only designated (such as the European Commission or the European Central Bank).

## 2. Shift mental Models: Constant Change is the new Normal

### ROOT CAUSE: FEAR OF NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF CHANGE AND LONGING FOR A SENSE OF CONTROL

After decades of relative political, economic and social stability, citizens are struck by the impression that the pace and intensity of change around them has increased. The world as we know it is constantly challenged, and politics does not manage to move beyond “crisis mode”. This makes many people feel insecure and afraid, especially because they experience changes as a threat to their own position, role and status within society. Illiberal populism appears to offer resistance to such change; to be an antidote to the existential fear of losing one’s country. Many people long for a sense of control which increases individuals’ willingness to vote for leaders or parties who promise simple solutions to complex problems, and who aim to stabilise the world around them – even at the expense of liberal and progressive policies of the past decades.

### RECOMMENDATION: NORMALISE CHANGE IN POLITICS AND PROVIDE THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO ENABLE CITIZENS TO ADAPT TO A VOLATILE AND COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT

The world around us is constantly changing – as it always has – and will certainly continue to do so at an increased pace. Societal and technological transformations fundamentally alter the fabric of our societies. This is why it is so important that politicians and the media stop framing change as an anomaly. The

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**“A compelling, positive vision for a shared future is the best antidote against illiberal forces.”**

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opposite is true: change is constant, stagnation and stability are the exception to this rule. It is therefore an absolute necessity for the political sphere to start normalising change in the public discourse. Furthermore, policy makers need to think more intensely about how politics can foster an increased individual and collective ability to successfully live a life in an environment which is constantly changing and, thus, requires great adaptability and resilience. The narrative of “we have to endure a limited time of change, and then everything will go back to normal” is not an option anymore in a “VUCA world” (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world). In the future, the best possible form of “taking back control” is to shape the process of change as much as one can – to adapt to volatile environments quickly and smartly, and to equip people with the tools that enhance their ability to navigate these new environments. This means – among many things – adapting educational and training systems, as well as reforming and investing in life-long individual and professional development. Politicians will hereby also have to start working on a public discourse which frames a common purpose and identity. A compelling, positive vision for a shared future is the best antidote against illiberal forces that have nothing to offer but a supposedly glorious past that is simple to deal with but cannot be returned to.

## 3. Promote Access to Information and Culture on a wide Scale and enable equal Opportunities

### ROOT CAUSE: INCREASING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INEQUALITY IN A DIGITISED WORLD

Over the past decades, economic, social and political imbalances have grown between white-collar and blue-collar workers, between poor and rich regions, between urban and rural areas, between well-connected regions and ‘digital deserts’. Digitalisation functions as an amplifier of these inequalities. It affects social equality, mobility, access to information, education



and equality of opportunities. Populism taps into an increasingly widespread “fear of loss” and creates a conflict in order to reinforce duality between a supposedly corrupt ‘elite’ and ‘normal’ citizens. Illiberal and undemocratic populism exploits the fear of those feeling left behind or even betrayed by a political class that seems to rule the world.

#### **RECOMMENDATION: MAKE THE EU A DRIVER OF SOCIAL MOBILITY AND COHESION**

Until now, investments in social cohesion and employment policies have been primarily made at the national level. Yet to lay the ground for a ‘Social Europe’, the EU should focus on the well-being of *all* its citizens and on creating a sense of belonging. Narrowing all the gaps – territorial, economic, cultural, generational – which threaten to divide societies in the EU has to be the priority when defining policies and providing a sense of justice against all types of inequality. In order to empower people the EU has to be (put) in the position to help national governments to provide better opportunities for their citizens, including access to education and an adequate social safety net. Furthermore, the EU should focus its budget and programmatic efforts towards increasing social mobility – which means empowering people in professional, educational, cultural and social aspects, in particular those who have no higher education. The EU and its member states should create a new, comprehensive investment programme for this, and give more budgetary powers to the European Parliament in order to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of funding priorities and ensure it focuses on people’s well-being.

#### **4. Restore Trust in the political Establishment by reconnecting Politicians with Citizens and vice-versa**

##### **ROOT CAUSE: THE EXPERIENCE OF MULTIPLE CRISES AND THE LACK OF CONNECTION BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND CITIZENS**

The populist surge of recent years is directly related to the multiple and complex crises European societies have been confronted with. The root causes of these crises partly stem from many years of political and

economic mismanagement, and from various forms of corruption (depending on different EU countries). Both at the EU and national levels these crises also arise from the lack of an effective and sustainable crisis management on the part of the political establishment. Moreover, the interventions of the European Central Bank, the European Commission, the Eurogroup – and the lack of democratic accountability of some of their measures – have contributed to an image of institutional bullying rather than problem-solving based on solidarity. That said, the rift between citizens and the political sphere runs far deeper. It reflects the complacency, and the lack of a healthy political culture and common vision displayed at the EU level. This has made various political parties indifferent and arbitrary in dealing with the needs and desires of ordinary citizens.

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#### **“Decision-makers have to work more closely, alongside citizens.”**

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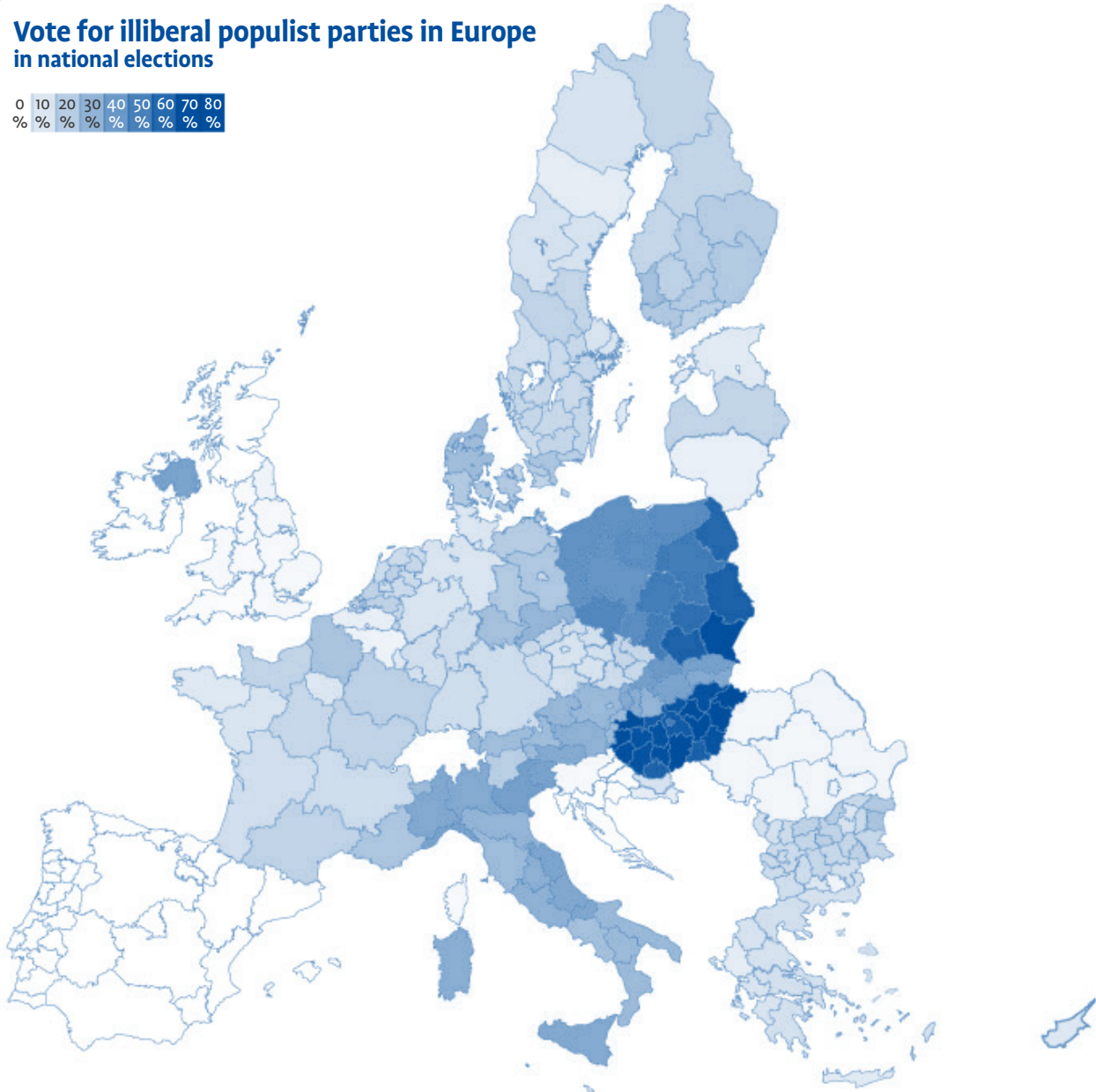
##### **RECOMMENDATION: IMPLEMENT AND COMMUNICATE DECISIONS IN A MORE CITIZEN-CENTRED FASHION**

Losing trust is very easy; gaining it back takes much longer. Listening to the needs, fears and desires of citizens is the starting point to rebuild trust between the public and the political spheres. Identifying new, more direct ways of communication with citizens and opening up the decision-making process through active citizen engagement would help to re-establish an eye-level relationship – one which shows that citizens’ demands are being taken seriously. Citizens will only listen to decision-makers if political representatives back up their words with actions, and if they deliver on their promises. This means decision-makers have to work more closely, alongside citizens, and harder than before to tackle the challenges identified – whilst at the same time being honest about the complexity of the issues and the time needed to find appropriate solutions. The public sphere and many politicians will have to become more tolerant of alternative political ideas, rather than dismissing new ideas as invalid for being “unrealistic”, “ideological” or constantly repeating that there is no (economic) alternative.



## Vote for illiberal populist parties in Europe in national elections

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% % % % % % % % %



Map created by Filipe Henriques (March 2018)

### SHARE OF THE VOTE FOR ILLIBERAL POPULIST PARTIES AS OF THE LAST NATIONAL ELECTION

Parties included are those that had 1% or more of the vote nationwide: FPÖ and G!LT in Austria; VB and PP in Belgium; United Patriots, Volya and Revival in Bulgaria; HDSSB in Croatia; KA and ELAM in Cyprus; Svobodni and SPD in Czech Republic; DF in Denmark; EKRE in Estonia; PS in Finland; FN and DLF in France; AfD in Germany; XA and ANEL in Greece; Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary; Fdi, LN and M5S in Italy; NA, NSL and VL in Latvia; TT in Lithuania; ADR and PID in Luxembourg; PVV and FvD in the Netherlands; KNP, PiS and K15 in Poland; PDR in Portugal; PRM and PRU in Romania; SNS, Kotleba and Sme Rodina in Slovakia; SNS in Slovenia; SD in Sweden; UKIP and DUP in the United Kingdom.

## 5. Promote democratic Innovations for Institutions and Processes

### **ROOT CAUSE: THE GROWING IMPRESSION THAT ESTABLISHED INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES ARE NOT WELL-EQUIPPED FOR TODAY'S CHALLENGES**

Parliaments and governments have an increasingly difficult time responding to current challenges in a timely, meaningful and sustainable manner. Despite this, both democratic institutions and processes remain largely unchanged, sticking to the same structures and working principles which have been used for decades. This lack of appropriate policies and political responses to pressing issues – and the growing gap between political responses and the rapidly changing world – makes it easy for illiberal populists to attack and discredit democratic institutions and decision-making, fuelling a dynamic which undermines public trust and lowering legitimacy.

### **RECOMMENDATION: FOSTER ADAPTIVE, AGILE AND MODERN PROCESSES IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

Many organisations in the private sector have realised that due to a complex and volatile global environment, they need to create mind-sets, structures, and processes which enable them to permanently adapt quickly to changes around them. Politics, conversely, does not need yet more management or further laborious technocratic decision-making. Rather, the world of politics and public administration needs to prioritise its own development and to start to foster organisational cultures that are fit for the 21st century. The development of working cultures, structures, and processes which allow institutions to provide timely and meaningful proposals for a shifting world are what is called for – not merely reacting to it. This development includes a higher degree of organisational agility, intensified horizontal and international collaboration, as well as smarter citizen participation. It also demands capacities for the consideration of a large array of data and of stakeholders in designing and implementing policies. If democratic organisations manage to do this it will strengthen their adaptiveness and responsiveness, and thus the legitimacy of democracy. Nevertheless, the unique structure of political responsibility in public

organisations such as ministries makes it hard to copy and paste frameworks for self-organisation and for greater agility from other organisations or other sectors. It takes intense experimentation to find solutions that fit with public institutions' main purposes, namely providing good public services to citizens and ensuring democratic representation and accountability. Prototyping different governance configurations at different and flexible territorial levels (local, trans-local, regional, supranational etc.) should be encouraged and supported.

## 6. Take into Account different Experiences of Democracy in EU Member States

### **ROOT CAUSE: VARYING PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN DIFFERENT EU COUNTRIES**

The debate about the root causes of populism in Europe often neglects the different social, economic, political and historical contexts of the respective countries. However, the current crisis of democracy is also shaped by the countries' individual history, culture and singularities. For instance, in Central and Eastern European states, the relatively late democratisation and the traumatising experience of radical market liberalisation after 1990 that came with it have led to a significantly different perception of liberal democracy and its benefits than in Western Europe. The association of liberal democracy with disorder, the weakening of community and economic anxiety has bred a fertile ground for illiberal populists, who contrast this experience with promises of order and control.

### **RECOMMENDATION: FOSTER A EUROPEAN UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW**

To establish strong European democracies, EU member states should start a dialogue on what constitutes a vibrant democracy, and where this differs from the status quo. History lessons at schools should have a broader horizon, including the history of other European countries, emphasising the historical roots of the rule of law and a humanist worldview – and what this means in practice. Teaching and learning in cross-national groups should be promoted, for example with an expansion of the Erasmus programme, the establishment of a European voluntary service or through cross-national

cooperation in border regions. In addition, a more Europeanised media would enable a break from the narrow, national frames often given to EU politics and in reporting on the state of affairs in neighbouring countries. To create a genuinely European media landscape, more financial resources have to be mobilised by the EU and its member states to this end. National policy makers should also increase the EU focus of their press and communication strategy. Whilst the diversity of democracies in Europe should, of course, be valued and even promoted, increased cooperation in the education and cultural sectors as well as in the media could help to promote a better understanding of a neighbour's singularities and commonalities, and help to foster important shared European values based on democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

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**“The image of a glorious past responds to the unfulfillable desires to win back control in a complex world.”**

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## 7. Offer distinctive political Visions and give more political Orientation to Citizens

**ROOT CAUSE: PEOPLE FEEL STUCK IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL STATUS QUO WITHOUT ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL VISIONS**

Many citizens today feel that they are stuck in their daily routines and that decision-makers do not provide new political visions for the future. Today's societies lack overarching narratives of how they should develop in the future, and what values should drive this development – making it easy for populists to delve into nostalgia and to promote an idealised imaginary past. This image of a glorious past responds to the unfulfillable desires amongst citizens to win back control over and orientation in a complex world.

## RECOMMENDATION: DEVELOP BOLD AND DISTINCTIVE POLITICAL VISIONS FOR A COMMON FUTURE

Political parties need to engage more actively in the competition for political ideas, and need to publicly convey different approaches if they want to tackle the frustration of their populations with politics. By providing different visions for the future, parties can promote the political debates necessary for a healthy democracy. Parties must invest time and effort in developing political visions, and need to complement these with a strategy to make sure they reach citizens and voters. Only if they are able to create distinct, coherent visions of how they want society to develop and of what changes are needed to get there will they be able to create meaningful narratives that are compelling enough to challenge illiberal populist tropes. Parties can do a lot of good if their visions help people to realise that the future can be a good place – but that requires change now. Only if there is an attractive place to move towards will people willingly start to cope with change, instead of trying to re-establish a simpler past that never existed.

## 8. Recreate a Sense of Community

**ROOT CAUSE: TODAY'S GLOBALISED WORLD DESTABILISED NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

Citizens today face a globalised, complex and rapidly changing world, whilst institutions that gave meaning and structure in the past have lost their power and relevance – be they trade unions, churches or local community organisations. The policies that led to growing inequality, decreased educational opportunities, volatile labour markets and less social security have caused a strengthening of identity-based politics, the social isolation of citizens and a widespread fear of the future. The increase of radical Islamist terrorism in Europe, coinciding with a surge in migration flows from the Middle East and African countries, have facilitated the perceived interlinkage and thus the strategic misuse of both phenomena – terrorism and migration. Europe's fumbling response to those challenges did not offer any sense of being in control, or of humanitarian or safety capacities. Struggling media markets faced with



digitalisation and increased competition have added to the dangerous right-wing populist narratives and are catalysing the fragmentation of values in society. Every change is now perceived as a threat to national identity. Neoliberal decision-making, in addition to societal trends resulting from globalisation and digitalisation, have made people highly responsive to populists – to those who promise to protect their identities and to solve complex problems with simple, pseudo-solutions.

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**“Established political actors should not try to outperform illiberal populists by making use of their rhetoric.”**

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**RECOMMENDATION: FOCUS ON INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY BUILDING AND PARTICIPATION**

Established political actors should not try to beat the populists at their own game and to try and outperform illiberal populists by making use of their rhetoric. Rather, they should realise the importance of social cohesion, better education and job options, and of further policies that will ensure greater equality of opportunity. These are the means by which to dismantle hatred and resentment within society and across nations. Further, they should work to find modern-day alternatives to those institutions, such as churches, which in the past enabled people from less privileged backgrounds to have access to a better education and greater societal participation. An increased focus on community building beyond national frames would help to strengthen a sense of relatedness and mutual support in an interdependent world, especially in an EU context. This is a prerequisite for fighting feelings of fear, anger and helplessness which are the biggest drivers of political distrust and aggression against minorities.

## 9. Address People's Fears and Needs in the public Sphere instead of ignoring them

**ROOT CAUSE: THE INCREASING DICHOTOMY BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL FEARS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

In the Netherlands, France, and to some extent in Germany, illiberal and undemocratic populist forces gathered steam because established political actors were unwilling to publicly address issues such as radical Islamism, migration, terrorism, national identity and ‘traditional’ family values. Instead, established politicians often left the field wide open to populist players who placed those topics at the top of their political agenda. As a result, it was the populists rather than politicians from the centre who framed the debate, defined the political solutions in those policy areas, and reframed them in line with their ideology. Compounding this, democratic politicians failed to promote a more inclusive political debate. Rather, they ‘pushed the buttons’ of potentially intolerant people by advertising diversity, promoting an open society, and communicating clearly the advantages of those – without making these resonate with those groups so that they could see the advantages of these values in or for their own lives. This has led to a further polarisation of society and pushes these people into the hands of populists.

**RECOMMENDATION: PROMOTE AN OPEN, INCLUSIVE AND FAIR PUBLIC DEBATE ON KEY ISSUES**

When certain policies or developments in society and politics become worries for a considerable part of the population, liberal democrats have to address them head-on and with an inclusive discourse. They need to show that they know what their fellow citizens are concerned about, and to include these concerns in their solutions. It also offers democratic politicians an opportunity to frame the debate by being (seen to be) the ones who take on these issues important to the electorate. This helps to keep worried citizens in the democratic frame of discourse, rather than losing them to populist voices. Hence actively addressing controversial issues – be it Islamist terrorism or migration – in the democratic sphere, rather than simply ignoring them, helps to avoid a political vacuum which can be exploited by illiberal and undemocratic populists.

## DIALOGUE ON EUROPE

# Rebuilding Trust and redefining Europe in tough Times

## Project Presentation

### WHAT IS THE APPROACH OF DIALOGUE ON EUROPE?

The European Union has been affected by a multi-dimensional crisis for almost a decade. Traditional solutions put forward through international summitry have proved ineffective. Therefore, the current challenges faced by the European project can only be confronted through the involvement of a **strong and connected civil society**.

### WHY, WHEN AND BY WHOM HAS IT BEEN INITIATED AND IMPLEMENTED?

With this need for a stronger involvement of the civil society in mind, the Berlin-based think tank Das Progressive Zentrum, in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office and many other partners, initiated **DIALOGUE ON EUROPE** in late 2015, especially in light of the EU-internal upheavals linked to the euro crisis and the austerity policy.

### WHO HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN THE DIALOGUE ON EUROPE PROCESS?

This trans-European project has brought together young, dedicated members of various civil society backgrounds from initially 6 countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy Portugal and Spain; later Poland and



**Michael Roth**, German Minister of State for Europe, discussing with participants of the #EuropeanTownHall Meeting in Lisbon, March 2016



**Frank-Walter Steinmeier**, then German Minister for Foreign Affairs, speaking at the DIALOGUE ON EUROPE Opening Conference in Berlin, June 2016

the UK) to analyse pressing EU-wide challenges and to elaborate concrete policy recommendations for the national and European level. In each country we worked together with one or more local partner organisations such as think tanks or foundations.

### WHICH WERE THE MAIN TOPICS, HOW AND WITH WHICH OBJECTIVE WERE THEY DISCUSSED?

In the light of the most pressing current and upcoming challenges of the EU and its member states, DIALOGUE ON EUROPE had four main topics: Populism, Social Cohesion, Migration & Integration and Sustainable Growth. The goal was to use various perspectives from social society members all over Europe in order to **formulate concrete and feasible policy recommendations** which could serve as input for policy makers at the national and European levels.

### WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF DIALOGUE ON EUROPE?

DIALOGUE ON EUROPE unfolded in three phases. From December 2015 to June 2016 bilateral #EuropeanTownHall Meetings took place in five Southern European cities, mostly with the participation of the **German Minister of State for Europe, Michael Roth**. Hence, during this period civil society literally met politics. From June 2016 to October 2017 by contrast, civil society



Niels Annen, today Minister of State at the German Federal Foreign Office, replying to participants of the #EuropeanTownHall Meeting in Madrid, June 2016

representatives elaborated independently policy analyses and recommendations. 60 of the #EuropeanTownHall participants cooperated in four so-called ‘**Thinking Labs**’ (according to the four main topics) via digital collaboration means and personal meetings at four ‘**European Thinking Lab Summits**’. Since the last Summit in Rome in October 2017, the Thinking Labs have finalised their policy recommendations. These will be presented during the Closing Conference in Brussels.

## WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DIALOGUE ON EUROPE AND DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM?

For more information about events, interviews with renowned experts, opinion editorials, analyses, press coverage and the final policy recommendations, please visit the project website [www.dialogue-on-europe.eu](http://www.dialogue-on-europe.eu). If you want to know more about the activities of Das Progressive Zentrum and its international projects go to [www.progressives-zentrum.org/?lang=en](http://www.progressives-zentrum.org/?lang=en) or follow us on **Twitter** (@DPZ\_Berlin) and **Facebook**.



# DIALOGUE ON EUROPE @work

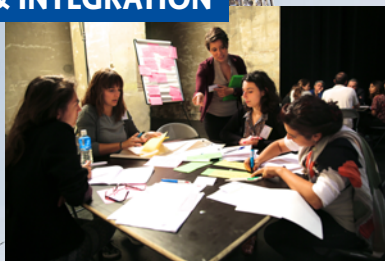
Some Impressions from  
our #EuropeanTownHall  
Meetings and Thinking  
Lab Summits all over  
Europe



## POPULISM



## MIGRATION & INTEGRATION



2nd European Thinking Lab Summit,  
Paris (March 2017)





**SUSTAINABLE GROWTH**



**SOCIAL COHESION**



3rd European Thinking Lab Summit,  
Rome (October 2017)

## Members of the Thinking Lab on Populism

Kassandra Becker	Elena García Mañes	Julian Rappold
Félix Blanc	Filipe Henriques	Judith Rohde-Liebenau
Daphne Büllsbach	Claudia Huber	Eduardo Suarez
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## Expression of Thanks by the Thinking Lab on Populism

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## Team and General Expression of Thanks

The concept and strategic guidance for DIALOGUE ON EUROPE has been delivered by the Executive Director of Das Progressive Zentrum, Dominic Schwickert. Philipp Sälhoff, Head of International Relations and External Affairs at Das Progressive Zentrum, has been the Project Lead during the entire process, including the network management with partner organisations in eight countries. Alban Genty, Project Manager at Das Progressive Zentrum, has been in charge of the overall project's operational management on a trans-European scale. He was parallelly in charge of the network building throughout Europe together with the Project Manager Benedikt Weingärtner, who moreover assured the quality management and editing process of all final results and documents. The two Project Assistants Camille Campagna and Lucas Matray gave highly valuable operative support throughout all stages of DIALOGUE ON EUROPE. The fantastic work of the Thinking Labs Co-Facilitators also needs to be highlighted: Sabrina Schulz & Luís Teles Morais, Cláudia Pedra & Maria Skóra, Octavio Medina and Max Neufeind as well Nuno Casimiro Vaz Silva & Hanno Burmester (in particular his support in conceptional process). During the process more than 500 attendees took part at 13 events all over Europe at colourful places which created a simply unique working and discussion atmosphere. To all of them we would like to express our gratitude.

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## ABOUT DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM

*Das Progressive Zentrum*, located in Berlin, is an independent and non-profit think tank. The aim of *Das Progressive Zentrum* is to foster new networks of progressive actors from different origins and work towards a general acceptance of innovative politics and aiming at economic and social progress. In this respect *Das Progressive Zentrum* gathers in its progressive debates mainly young thinkers and decisionmakers from Germany and Europe.



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