POLICY BRIEF

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How to fight Populism in Europe?
Lessons from France, Italy and Germany

The victory of Emmanuel Macron may have halted the populist surge for now, but it can hardly mitigate the effects of the Brexit-Trump double earthquake. Progressives and democrats are still in defence, both in Europe and worldwide. This policy brief aims, firstly, to provide crucial insights into the genesis of populism, particularly with regard to France, Italy, and Germany. Secondly, decisive political strategies on how to cope with this great overall threat will be discussed. It is argued that there are ways to gain back ground if progressives develop a new attitude, display more democratic enthusiasm, provide a narrative of positive change, connect with voters on a more personal level, and intensify transnational exchange.

Some words on defining populism

Is populism a fully-fledged ideology with clearly articulated political ideas or rather a mere political strategy that essentially anyone can follow in the political realm? Politicians, journalists and academics are still divided over this question of definition. In this policy brief, we follow Cas Mudde's claim that populism is actually something in-between these two theses, namely a "thin ideology" with a substantial core that can be combined with a variety of political convictions.[2] This substantial core consists, first and foremost, of the claim to be the true, and the only, representative of the people and the according juxtaposition of "the people" and the political establishment as a "cartel" of corrupt elites. Since this policy brief considers three very different kinds of populist parties and movements, this is where we will draw the line with regard to definitions. Hence, our understanding of populism is rather broad and cannot take account of the valuable contributions of, for example, Frank Decker on "new right-wing populism".[3] In addition, Jan-Werner Müller's recent argument that anti-pluralism constitutes the second defining feature of populism (next to the juxtaposition of elite and "the people") cannot be followed here, as it is unclear how well it conforms to the Italian case.[4] The problem with our definition is, of course, that in

2.   Mudde, Cas. 2004. 'The Populist Zeitgeist'. Government and Opposition, Vol. 39(4), pp. 542-544.
3.   Decker, Frank. 2006. 'Die populistische Herausforderung. Theoretische und ländervergleichende Perspektiven', in: Frank Decker (ed). Populismus: Gefahr für die Demokratie oder nützliches Korrektiv? Wiesbaden, p. 12.
4.   Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. 'Was ist Populismus?' Ein Essay. Frankfurt, p. 19.

current political discourses, it is a highly common strategy to separate the elite establishment from one's own political cause. One only has to think of the French presidential election, in which all candidates, including Emmanuel Macron, presented themselves as outsiders. But one has to make a distinction between challenging the established parties, which is legitimate in order to open up the political debate, and using a violent rhetoric of criticism of the media in order to present oneself as a victim of the "elite" or of some kind of conspiracy. There is also a great difference between criticism of the elite (justified or not) and making references to the metaphysical notion of a (potentially homogenous) people, which excludes part of the electorate.

How can the rise of populism be explained?

The years 2016 and 2017 have undoubtedly been the most successful ones for populists in the post-World War II era so far. Our times are therefore historic in a certain sense, and might be seen as the era of the global shift in the future, of the fight between liberal democracy and its opponents. But, however important the forthcoming elections in Germany and Italy are, we should not merely focus on these electoral deadlines alone, but rather should consider populism as a lasting phenomenon which has arisen in the last 20 years and which is likely to last for a significant period of time. Populism did not only appear in Europe following the global financial crisis of 2008, and it will not simply go away anytime soon, no matter how encouraging the economic recovery may be. But even if no monocausal explanation of its expansion is convincing, two developments demand particular attention: on the one hand, economic inequalities, and on the other hand, a cultural backlash.

Economic figures from across the continent seem to paint a grim picture: rising income inequalities, wage stagnation, unfair redistribution, fiscal competition and job insecurity. It could be argued that such increasing inequalities add fuel to the populist movement, as they produce fears for the future even amongst the economically fortunate. These fears can be exploited by populists: geographical studies in France have shown that the Front National is growing more rapidly in the areas where inequalities are more marked.

The increasing gap between the working and middle classes could be seen as causing a split in the alliances formed post-war in a period of economic growth, which might potentially fuel the populist rhetoric of "Us against Them". One of the key triggers of the populist surge, at least in many Southern European countries, is the insistence of some countries, including Germany under the leadership of Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble, on one-sided economic policies. The almost fetishised preoccupation with and insistence on rigid economic austerity, the negation of European solidarity, and perhaps most of all, the lack of any significant growth initiative was and is to a certain extent grist to the mill of social inequalities and populist rhetoric. However, the fact that populists have also been successful in Northern European countries points to some limitations of this explanation. Economic factors alone cannot explain the rise of populism. Another decisive factor is the cultural backlash which is facing the new progressive values which have gained in discourse power since at least the 1970s. In the words of Inglehart and Norris: "populist support can be explained primarily as a social psychological phenomenon, reflecting a nostalgic reaction among older sectors of the electorate seeking a bulwark against long-term processes of value change, the 'silent revolution' that transformed Western cultures during the second half of the twentieth century".[5]

"Stereotypically associating populism with the poorer and less educated is not only simplistic – it also antagonises parts of society"

However, one should not make the ageist mistake of blaming the elderly for the current eruption of populism. In Germany and France, for example, populists are receiving significant support from the younger generation.[6] As a matter of fact, there are three common biases in political and media discourses when thinking about populist voters: that they are male, old, and uneducated. Neither of these three features are true per se, although there are significant contextual

5. Inglehart, Ronald F. And Norris, Pippa. 2016. 'Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash'. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series 16-026, p. 13.
6. See Tomik, Stefan. 2016. 'Jung, männlich – und enttäuscht'. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 14/3/2016, https://tinyurl.com/zw6v4sm (9/6/2017).

differences, as will be seen in the country analyses below. In any case, stereotypically associating populism with the poorer and less educated is not only simplistic, but is also stigmatising. It only serves to antagonise parts of society – which, particularly from a progressive perspective, ought to be a concern.

Part 1: Populism in France, Italy and Germany

POPULISM IN FRANCE

France has been struggling with the rise of the Front National since the mid 1980s, when it became clear that economic strategies to renew prosperity were being pursued without success. Unemployment, weak growth and industrial relocations fuelled widespread pessimism and a feeling that political action was powerless. The Front National went on to flourish, especially amongst working class voters, as the overall economic situation of the country became more alarming. Yet nowadays, it is not only those who have been left behind by globalisation who are voting for the far-right: many middle-class households are fearing a decline in social mobility and life chances and are thus turning to far-right parties. With growing inequalities comes growing support for the Front National. Increasing social polarisation also strengthens the fear that, hit by economic difficulties, we will be worse-off than our parents or that our children might do even worse. Inequalities in opportunities also affect the relatively well-off and help populists to exploit the fear of the future.

Many voters do not trust the economic programme of the Front National. As Emmanuel Macron was able to show through the dramatic tension of the candidates' debate on television a few days before the run-off, the Front National's loss of credibility on economic issues is clearly its Achilles' heel. The party is trying to overcome this weakness by stressing cultural issues, the fear of increased migration and terror attacks. The party's ideology promotes a counter-cultural battle against the open society that echoes a renewed cultural pessimism.

This ability to dramatise the economic hardships and cultural fears of the population is difficult to fight. As a matter of fact, established parties have been failing

to prevent or counter the development of the Front National since its rise: they had set three strategies to do this, all of which ultimately failed. In the 1980s, the socialist French President François Mitterrand cynically thought that he would be able to manipulate the far-right forces and destroy the conservative-right by helping the electoral success of Jean-Marie Le Pen, but he tragically underestimated the erosion of the support of working-class voters for leftist parties and the shift of some protest votes from the far-left to the far-right. Then, the conservative President Jacques Chirac had another strategy: he did not want to have any discussions with the Front National, being afraid that he could be attacked on an inclination to compromise with extremist ideas. But this decision to quarantine the extremists off ("cordon sanitaire") was unsuccessful too. It gave Jean-Marie Le Pen the opportunity to portray himself as a pariah; as the only candidate able to change the political system from the outside. He pointed out the collusion of the big parties and gained the attention of voters far beyond the traditional right-wing extremist electorate. Then, Nicolas Sarkozy won the 2007 election with another strategy, in which he adopted some of the focus-topics of the Front National, such as on law and order issues, immigration, attacks on the media, attacks on legal punishment and a culture of permissiveness. This allowed him to win the presidential election, but in doing so, he legitimised topics which were previously marginalised and thus normalised Marine Le Pen's party. The Front National was then able to tell the public to "vote for the original, not the copy" and profited from the centrality Sarkozy gave to its favoured topics. None of these strategies has been convincing.

The strategy of the Front National, on the contrary, has been successful. The party has used its self-proclaimed "dé-diabolisation " strategy to soften its aggressive rhetoric, hide anti-Semitism, replace xenophobic attacks with the denunciation of Islam and praise the "French laïcité".

This strategy has been led by Marine Le Pen (against the will of some of the more traditionalist fringes of her party, including her niece Marion Maréchal-Le Pen). It has brought further new voters in the form of women, civil servants and young people - all electorates which were previously hostile to Jean-Marie Le Pen. The

widening of the appeal of the Front National is significant as it contradicts analysts' previous theories about populism. For example, contrary to the previously widely-held belief amongst scholars that few women vote for populists, the Front National has been able to win a part of the female vote. In addition, the success of the Front National contradicts the theory that those who are more educated are less likely to vote for populists: some scholars had thought that, as more and more people are being educated to higher levels, populists will gain fewer votes, as shown in the recent presidential election in Austria. However, the case of the Front National has proved that we cannot rely on this kind of mechanical effect, as although young French voters are more educated than older ones, more young people tend to vote in favour of the Front National than the population over 65.

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The Front National is now almost a catch-all party in the sense that it is trying to attract many different electorates and appeal to many constituencies. A considerable amount of French people no longer identify with the traditional divisions of French political life. They are either indifferent or are tired of traditional debates. They do not only make their political choices with regard to economic issues, but are increasingly concerned about cultural values and traditions and fear a loss of identity and authority.

The core of Le Pen's programme is still the nationalist and xenophobic conviction that the country is threatened by Europe and globalisation. Concerning employment, the party still recommends the "priorité nationale" (renamed "préférence nationale" in the new programme): the obligation to hire French workers and the exclusion of foreign residents from social benefits. Le Pen has replaced neoliberal economic policies with a defence of the French social model and public services. But this means that she favours new protectionist rules and, inevitably, a "Frexit". Leaving the Euro, and then

the EU, would be utterly dangerous and even suicidal for France. A large majority of voters are attached to the EU and are more than sceptical about this part of her programme. This is the main reason why Marine Le Pen was unable to win the election. Her credibility crumbled on economic issues at the end of her campaign, and her party is now split between those who stress the need to leave the Eurozone (Florian Philippot) and a growing majority which is calling for another strategy. This shows that the danger is not over yet, as the party has been able to change its ideology to gain new voters.

"The Front National is seeking a long-lasting impact on democracy by creating a new political elite through local elections"

The Front National is now looking to have a long-lasting impact on democracy by building a long-term strategy which includes the creation of a new political elite through local elections. Even though Le Pen did not win the presidential election, her party is slowly growing, providing new opportunities to its members and enabling them to set the political agenda both on a local and national scale. This grants them influence in mainstream politics. But the presidential election showed that the growing influence of the Front National has not been completely fatal for progressive politics: a clearly pro-European campaign was able to win, with new policies, new faces, new methods and a participative movement which is open to new ideas.

POPULISM IN ITALY

Over the last 25 years, Italy has become a laboratory for global populism. While traditional parties have continued to decline, new forces have been on the rise, exploiting the anti-establishment sentiment which is widespread among voters. This has led to the birth of a broad range of different forms of populism: from the regional populism of the Northern League, to the judiciary populism of judges establishing their own political parties, to the plutocratic, media-driven populism of Silvio Berlusconi. Several of these experiments have successfully been exported abroad, as shown by the election of the 45th President of the United States of America, which displays remarkable analogies with

Berlusconi's rise twenty years ago, and by the increasingly relevant role played by the judiciary in electoral campaigns throughout Europe.

However, for a few years now, populism has been taking a political form in Italy which other western democracies have not yet known. The strength of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) is based on the union of two equally important components, an analogical one and a digital one, whose unprecedented political synthesis is extremely effective. The analogical component, incarnated by the unbridled physicality of Beppe Grillo, a stand-up comedian turned party ideologue, provides the movement with its heat and its passion. Grillo began his campaigns against the country's political and economic elites fifteen years ago, speaking up for the small shareholders of big companies, the victims of the Argentine Tango Bonds as well as the country's young part-time workers. As the number of his followers started to increase, he began to organise enormous meetings in public squares, at first in Bologna and then all over Italy, which he called V-Days, or Vaffanculo-Days: in English, "Fuck You (All) Days". In 2009, he established the Movimento 5 Stelle, which started to put forth its own candidates at local elections. In 2013, the movement had its strongest moment yet, obtaining 25.5% of the vote in the national elections and bringing 163 of its members into parliament. In 2016, the party conquered the municipalities of Rome and Turin, electing Virginia Raggi and Chiara Appendino as mayors.

"The strength of the Five Star Movement is based on the union of two equally important components, an analogical one and a digital one"

At first sight, the Movimento 5 Stelle appears to be another classic populist movement which shakes up anti-establishment feelings and panders to the anti-European and anti-immigration sentiments that have grown enormously within the Italian public in recent years. Behind this rather conventional facade, however, lies a sophisticated digital infrastructure conceived by the co-founder of the Movimento, Gianroberto

Casaleggio, a web-marketing consultant. The party has no physical headquarters and holds no regular meetings aside from the periodic public campaigns held by Grillo. For the Movimento 5 Stelle, digital platforms are not only where communication takes place, but are its primary source of identity and its only organisational tool. Contrary to the Pirate Parties in Northern Europe, however, it does not have an open-source infrastructure, but it is rather so that the movement's entire life is based upon a digital platform that is entirely controlled by a single private company.

As a marketing expert, the movement's co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio (who passed away in the Spring of 2016) understood long ago that the internet would change politics forever. He sensed that this would make a new form of political movement possible; one which is guided by the preferences of the voter-consumers in a way that had never been possible before. But he also realised that the digital dimension alone was still too cold and too distant to give life to a real mass movement in Italy. For this reason, he decided on, and invested heavily in, the analogical component bearing the name Beppe Grillo. The strength and resilience of the Movimento 5 Stelle stems from this combination: traditional populism in conjunction with an all-powerful large data platform.

The two most disruptive features of the Movimento 5 Stelle originate from this very peculiar setup. Firstly, like other populist movements, Movimento 5 Stelle aims to represent not just one part of the population but the totality of the "people". Unlike other populist movements, however, Movimento 5 Stelle supports a complete overhaul of democratic procedures to go with this ambition. Its founders do not conceive of the movement as just another party destined to participate in the game of representative democracy, but rather as a vehicle destined to guide Italy towards a new political regime. Namely, they are seeking a direct democracy where citizens' representatives disappear because the citizens themselves take all decisions via a process of permanent online consultation.

Secondly, in virtue of this overarching ambition, Movimento 5 Stelle does not function like a traditional movement would, but rather more like the Google

PageRank algorithm. It does not have a proper political orientation, agenda, or concrete policy proposals, but operates like an algorithm built to intercept consensus on the basis of the issues that are popular at any given time. For this reason, if immigration becomes an important subject, Grillo deals with it by adopting the most popular position, which these days is a nationalist / borderline xenophobic posture. The same applies to issues surrounding the Euro, the banking crisis and any other topic which is in the news. If any one of these waves of public opinion were to evolve in the opposite direction, Movimento 5 Stelle would simply change its position (we have seen this happen a number of times already), without a hint of embarrassment.

"The Five Star Movement's machine is the political translation of Google: it intercepts users' preferences and gives them exactly what they want"

The Movimento 5 Stelle's machine is the political translation of Google: it intercepts users' preferences and gives them exactly what they want. From this point of view, it represents a trickier challenge than the other European populist movements because, while exploiting the same streak of popular resentment, the Movimento 5 Stelle has shaped itself in a far more contemporary fashion than other populist parties in Europe have.

POPULISM IN GERMANY
What sets the recent history of populism in Germany apart from the situation in Italy and France is the fact that no party considered to be populist has been able to achieve considerable electoral success on a significant scale since World War II. Apart from a short-lived surge of the so-called Republican party on the national and European level in the late 1980s, and the STATT party and Schill party on the state level in the 1990s and 2000s, no relevant populist party has been able to reach a critical mass. This, of course, does not include certain populist elements that can be found in virtually every major party, particularly during election periods. It should also be noted that in certain regions of Germany, there is constant, while relatively low, support for Neo-Nazi parties, such as the NPD and DVU.

This relative absence of populism in the mainstream political sphere ended with the emergence of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) on the political scene in the midst of the debate surrounding the debt crisis in the Eurozone in 2013. Founded by economics professor Bernd Lucke, the AfD started as a monothematic party centring around Euro-scepticism and anti-Euro sentiments, opposing the course of Angela Merkel's government in the Eurozone crisis. In the subsequent federal elections in 2013, the AfD only narrowly missed the electoral threshold of 5%. After a number of successes on local and state levels and after entering the European Parliament in 2014, the popularity of the AfD slowly declined when the Eurozone crisis faded from the major political agenda. At the same time, the AfD began to develop an internal conflict regarding whether it should focus on economic or more societal, anti-immigration issues. This conflict led to party founder Bernd Lucke and others, who were focused more on economic aspects, to eventually leave the party in 2015. The accelerated arrival of refugees in Germany, mainly as a result of the Syrian Civil War, in the summer of 2015 served as a boost for the AfD and supported a shift in the party's agenda and rhetoric towards increasingly aggressive nationalist and xenophobic tones. Ever since, the AfD has gained momentum once again and is consistently polling between 6% and 12%, at eye level with the smaller German parties of the Greens, Left and the liberal FDP at the federal level. The AfD is also gaining considerable shares of the electorate in individual Eastern German State Elections (e.g. Saxony-Anhalt with a result of 23%). One explanation for the rise of the AfD is that the voter potential for a radically right-wing party has existed for quite some time in Germany, yet previously there was no party that could channel this potential within the established political system. Another explanation sees the AfD as having filled a vacuum that was partly created due to a convergence of the other parties as the centre-right CDU became "socialdemocratised" under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Recently, there has been another heavy fragmentation process underway within the AfD, with public power struggles showcasing a deep divide between the radical, aggressively nationalist wing and those in the party who want to take a more moderate stance with

the long-term goal of establishing the AfD as a viable option for government. The more "rational" wing surrounding Frauke Petry suffered heavy losses at the federal party conference in April 2017, where hardliner Alexander Gauland prevailed and was nominated as a candidate for the federal election alongside Alice Weidel. It remains to be seen if the estrangement between the two wings will eventually lead to the demise of the entire party, which currently does not seem to be imminent. The strategic orientation of the AfD has taken the opposite path to the Front National: whereas the Front National under the leadership of Marine Le Pen has recently taken a more moderate approach, namely by removing anti-Semitic elements (even if the anti-Semitism has been replaced by Islamophobia), the AfD started off further in the centre than the Front National but has moved sharply to the right with no intention of toning down its harsh rhetoric.

"The increasing differences between SPD and CDU can be seen as a positive consequence of the success of the AfD"

The influence the AfD has had so far can be measured on two different levels. Firstly, it can be argued that the party has at least been partially successful in its aim of moving the parameters of the political landscape to the right to a certain extent. The centre-right CDU is under pressure to move to a more right-leaning stance, especially on issues surrounding migration, in order to win back traditionally conservative voters who have been deterred by the party's modernisation. At the same time, the centre-left SPD has begun to increasingly distinguish itself from its coalition partner, the CDU. This differentiation between the two major parties can be seen as a positive development, as more differentiation can lead to better representation of differing interests and more diverse political offerings. The AfD has also been relatively successful in setting the public agenda because migration and security remain some of the more hotly debated topics amongst the German public.

Another angle from which the impact of the AfD can be examined is whether the party could realistically assume responsibility as part of the government. Here, the answer is fairly unambiguous: currently, there is no realistic option of the AfD forming coalition governments on a state or federal level with any of the existing democratic parties. Part of the reason for this is that the AfD can be seen as unwilling to govern, with the perception being that it would rather remain staunchly committed to the role of an "outside corrective" opposing the government. They are also faced with the problem that those members of the AfD who do get into parliament often have no previous experience with parliamentary work and its obligations, which results in the party not performing professionally in a number of parliaments. In addition, at this point, no major party is willing to take the enormous political risk of entering a coalition with the AfD.

Nevertheless, the AfD is becoming the most favoured party in some regions, and has built up particular strongholds in Eastern Germany with results of over 20%. Furthermore, it has seats in 11 state parliaments and is expected to become an omnipresent parliamentary member by completing the full range of 16 representations in the next state elections. The established political parties are still doing everything they can to try to prevent the AfD from gaining governmental responsibility. In the Federal State of Sachsen-Anhalt, the established parties even resorted to creating unprecedented coalitions: the CDU, SPD and the Greens joined forces in order to keep the AfD, who achieved a record high of 24%, out of power. Therefore, the long-term impact of the AfD can be expected to be fairly limited, although the further success of the party is highly dependent on the further development of the refugee crisis in Germany, which is currently the main catalyst for their success.

Part 2: Political Counter-Strategies

Perhaps the greatest challenge for effectively countering populists lies in the fact that progressives are often perceived as mere defenders of the status quo – and, indeed, this is often what they are. Given the ruthless attacks on liberal democracy from many corners, progressives and democrats are often swamped, but are also often content with the task of defending our democratic and liberal achievements. There seems to be a strong underlying belief among democratic actors that great positive change is hardly possible anymore. What is needed is more democratic enthusiasm and an accompanying positive, sweeping narrative of political change for the better.

To put it bluntly: progressives and democrats can learn from populists and their successes! Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen and Jarosław Kaczyński all believe in their ability to shape politics and in the possibility of fundamental change. Their megalomania combined with their crude political views is, of course, extremely dangerous. But at the same time, it holds an enormous energy for political change. Progressives need more people who self-empower themselves; who motivate themselves to achieve the impossible; who dare to create pictures of a good future; who emanate optimism and idealism. Our societies cannot be renewed from a position of defence. What we need is the belief in the possibility of change. Hence, first and foremost, progressives should focus on developing a new attitude which focuses on their strengths. We need more enthusiasm for political debate – particularly regarding what is good for our society and how positive change could and should look. The most pressing task is to create pictures of a positive, attractive future and enrich this through policy proposals. In the following, we present six more concrete measures which promise to promote the outlined task.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Taking back control of the narrative

In many regards, populists have achieved their goal of dominating public discourse and have – at least partly – set the political agenda, e.g. on migration in Germany. This should not be accepted! Progressives need to develop a narrative and a positive way of framing democratic and progressive politics which would allow them to set the political agenda. The future of our democracies and of Europe should be left neither to the populists nor to technocrats and uninspired politicians. A progressive narrative must focus on the doctrines of openness, pluralism, economic strength and supranational cooperation – we largely owe our prosperity to these factors! In an increasingly complex world, instances in which simplistic answers lead to satisfying results are seldom. Going back to regressive nationalist concepts is not a viable, let alone desirable, option. **Progressives need to underline that globalisation – in conjunction with fair distribution and the right amount of regulation – can serve as an opportunity to create wealth, instead of being a threat.** In this regard, a confident stance on previous achievements and a positive outlook towards the future instead of self-doubt are needed.

2. Promoting qualitative growth and social equality

The socio-economic situation in large parts of Europe plays a considerable role in the rise of populism. There are many countries, especially in Southern Europe, where people have needed to sacrifice a lot due to rigid austerity measures. Cuts in welfare, health, education and public services have sometimes been so far-reaching and radical that many families, as well as old and young people, have lost a considerable part of their income whilst having to pay more taxes and more money for public services. These negative consequences of tough austerity measures, particularly in Southern Europe, and the tremendous hardships many European countries have gone through in the last few years are all too often forgotten or simply dismissed as "necessary homework" in countries like Germany. Structural reforms were certainly needed in many countries, and often still are. But promoting economic austerity, extensive privatisation and social welfare cutbacks while lacking any substantial growth initiative was, both in

economic and in social terms, a fallacious approach. What is needed are European approaches that put the social question in relation to macro-economic development back on the table, but within the context of the 21st century. **Progressives should advocate approaches that go beyond merely increasing the social welfare state, but which also encompass innovative ideas about qualitative growth, social equality and sustainable economies.** In addition, with a firm commitment to European solidarity, this should contribute to the long-term foundation upon which our democratic societies can develop and prosper.

3. Taking cultural and identity factors seriously

The rise of populism cannot be explained by socio-economic factors alone. In addition, the phenomenon is also result of a "cultural backlash". Hence, in order to win voters back, democrats and progressives need to take the factors of culture and identity seriously and make offers in this regard that are compatible with liberal democratic values. In Western European states, politicians often shy away from republican rhetoric. **However, in order to connect the electorate to the political system, political parties and politicians, a political rhetoric that promotes the ideas of a common destiny and belonging, albeit not based on ethnic, but rather on "thin" cultural and political grounds, is needed.** Politicians and the media should, for example, promote the idea of a European "constitutional patriotism" (Habermas) much more forcefully. This is especially pertinent against the background of the current refugee crisis: a pluralist and open-minded interpretation of patriotism, which allows for integration, seems more necessary than ever. In addition, as Lochocki has argued, one could promote European integration as a firmly embedded component of national interest, as a means of safeguarding national values and assets. This takes identity factors seriously and counters the populists' nationalist argument.[7]

4. Carefully implementing emotive elements into communication strategies

The voter as a homo economicus making rational, fact-based decisions is a misconception. Human beings clearly cater to emotions; the fundamental currency of politics is feeling. To prevent politicians from being perceived as "cold", emotionless technocrats who are unable to inspire, one crucial element of a viable strategy against populism should focus on integrating emotional messages into public communication, with the particular aim of making politicians more approachable. **Faces are more likely to be remembered than abstract concepts, which is why a careful and well-adjusted emotionalisation and personalisation of politics is key in the pursuit of winning over hearts and minds.** Naturally, this does not imply resorting to over-emotionalisation, let alone misleading claims or false promises. Fact-based arguments are the basis for successful and credible policy-making. However, one has to combine sound argumentation with relatable and accessible politicians - to try to reach out not only to the minds, but also to the "hearts" of voters and citizens.

5. Using adaptive language and promoting charismatic leaders

Using appropriate, context-conscious language obviously plays a significant role in political communication. One of the major reasons for voter disaffection is the often cryptic and overly complicated language politicians use. Empty phrases fail to resonate with the electorate and lead to a decline in the willingness to listen to what politicians have to say in the first place. Trust in political discourse can be restored **by breaking down this "language barrier". Actors should explain policies in an easier to understand manner and should communicate in a way that helps voters to comprehend the decision-making process.** This of course does not mean adopting populist vocabulary or simplistic and shallow communication. Progressives should openly address fears whilst also rejecting xenophobic or racist posturing. They should help voters to understand political processes and the reasons why certain decisions are made – in other words, using simple language to convey deep messages. What is more, the centre-left is lacking charismatic leading figures. We need top politicians who are able to inspire and mobilise people and provide a positive framing of liberal democracy and Europe. Political leaders like Emmanuel Macron, Matteo Renzi or Martin Schulz can give at least some hope for European progressives in this sense.

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7.   Lochocki, Timo. 2014. 'The Unstoppable Far Right?', Europe Policy Paper 4, p. 1.

6. Promoting a more lively democracy

It is a mistake to hope that the populist momentum that has woven through Europe will fade away quickly. Therefore, we should adopt deliberate mid-term to long-term action to counter its growing influence. Effective strategies to counter populism cannot rely on the strategy of shutting out populists through institutional reforms (e.g. changing electoral laws or the representative system in an attempt to get rid of a populist party). Doing so would give the populists the perfect opportunity to use their favourite spin against the establishment and its "insider-arrangements". Yet undertaking institutional reform to make democracy as a whole more lively, adaptable and inclusive is a promising path to counter populism. In addition, democratic actors must be made more accountable: corruption scandals have stained too many parliaments in Europe. The exemplarity of representatives has thus become crucial. **Measures such as limiting the accumulation of mandates, increasing transparency and accountability in the legislative process or promoting the parity of genders have a positive effect on the renewal of political representatives. Political parties must open themselves to new members, allow short-term engagement with the party, and adopt open procedures of participation.** Furthermore, democracies need new, innovative ways of fostering participation. Experiments with democratic innovations such as deliberative mini-publics, projects allowing citizens to plan public spaces, or participatory budgeting from local to national level should be sought. The particular focus should be on increasing and deepening participation rates whilst not endangering democratic equality or the representation of social groups.

7. Learning from each other

Democrats all over Europe are facing the same, or at least similar, challenges with regard to populism and political disaffection. However, transnational exchange and mutual learning – particularly among members of national parliaments - is still the exception, not the rule. A crucial way to foster this is to intensify transnational exchange and mutual learning amongst democratic and progressive actors all over Europe. Cooperation on a transnational level is therefore crucial in countering populist sentiments as countries with similar problems can learn from each other as to how they can best be solved. Moreover, transnational coalitions can work together on strategies and form alliances to counter populism together. This is all the more important as populists also work on a transnational level and therefore must be combatted in the same manner.

8. Striking the right balance between isolating and confronting populists

The modus operandi of populists usually involves calculated provocation in order to increase public exposure and push the boundaries of what is socially acceptable to say in public. Often, these kinds of statements get retracted after a public uproar; however the retraction usually gathers far less attention than the initial statement. Picking up on each and every one of those targeted provocations acknowledges populists' positions as at least worthy of a reply and helps to further spread the often poisonous messages. Too often, populists dominate the public and media discourse to an extent which is, in most cases, at odds with their electoral results or political power. The media often acts as the populists' messenger and plays straight into their hands when it hypes up remarks which obviously had the sole aim of gaining attention. **Hence, much more restraint in dealing with populist actors is needed, particularly on the part of the media.** That being said, ignoring populists completely bears plenty of risks as well: total marginalisation plays into their narrative of victimisation and being the brave underdog against the repressive elite. Therefore, efforts to engage with populist ideas and expose flaws in their arguments are vital. Fact-checking populist claims remains an important, if sometimes tiring, task.[7] Media actors should be strongly encouraged to participate in this endeavour much more thoroughly. Yet there is ultimately no alternative to consistent, principle-led argumentation from democrats and progressives. Even though some supporters of populist parties may not be receptive to rational arguments, dialogue with them should not be categorically denied as this would add fuel to the notion of an arrogant political class and would thus only confirm populists' prejudices.

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8. Also see the "TruLies – The Truth about Lies on Europe"-project in this regard: www.trulies-europe.de

HOW NOT TO DO IT

1. No moralism

Populists' rhetoric usually denies any political legitimacy to their opponents. It is therefore difficult to find the right way to have a fair and fruitful political debate with populists. For too long, an easy answer has been to condemn political proposals on moral grounds (the fight against racism, for example). As legitimate as it may seem, it has proven to have little effect in electoral battles, especially when it sounds like the moralising views of the middle class. As argued above, stigmatisation of people according to affiliation with social class, gender, and age, should be avoided at all costs. Democrats should once again take the lead on the political agenda and should not accept the priorities set by extremists. One should not engage, for example, in any debate marked by conspiracy theories. But, aside from that, democracy accepts any kind of political debate. Therefore, it is legitimate to raise questions on Europe, and critical stances against the EU should not be stigmatised as anti-European and populist. It is also legitimate for democracies to adopt special measures to protect the constitutional order, such as those which defend pluralism, freedom of the media and human rights: "democrazia protetta" in Italy and "wehrhafte Demokratie" (militant democracy) in Germany.

It is more effective to challenge the programme of populist parties by pointing at the consequences of their concrete proposals than by debating their values. This is particularly the case in less prominent political fields: right-wing populists mainly focus on questions of migration, security and identity, keeping their stances on social and economic affairs away from the agenda. It is vital to explain, for example, why the economic programme of the Front National in France would worsen the situation of the lower middle class through inflation, loss of competitiveness, capital flight and a dramatic decline of investment. Far from showing an interest in the people left behind by globalisation, populist parties have short-term strategies driven by ideology which give no real answers to legitimate social anxieties. Whereas progressives must strongly defend the credibility of their programmes and provide serious economic solutions, voters of populist parties often do not question their economic policies. As the Brexit vote showed, populist arguments are often inconsistent.

2. No counter-populism

The negativity associated with populism in Europe due to the tragic events of the 20th century is not universal. In South America, Peronism has appealed to the people in this way with other political implications. Therefore, some political analysts and scholars value populism as a way to take the voter's concerns more seriously: populist leaders supposedly point out the issues that really matter for the voters which traditional parties fail to address. This leads to the promotion of a "left-wing populism" as the best response to "right-wing populism".[9]

"Left-wing populism" in this sense refers to a populism which genuinely deals with the concerns of the voters and which is not captured by the nationalist, xenophobic and authoritarian rhetoric of right-wing parties. Democracy, in this perspective, is viewed as being weakened by an oligarchy of parties. A newcomer who breaks the domination of the traditional parties is therefore regarded as positive, as change is seen to come from the extremes. If political confrontation marks a clear-cut delimitation between left and right, political programmes will be seen as trustworthy again. By doing so, this strategy offers to restore a nostalgic and even dangerous vision of political confrontation, building on the political thought of German jurist Carl Schmitt, crown jurist of the Third Reich. What is more, it underestimates the ability of populist parties to change politics, to blur the debate and delegitimise non-elected institutions which are vital to our liberal democracies (independent judiciary, international conventions and treaties, etc.). Furthermore, this strategy does not meet the current need for new political and sociological coalitions. Populists do not propose coalitions, but rather a mythical unity of the "People". The real question is how we can build a new, stable coalition around the middle class.

3. No imitation or integration

There are certain measures which appear reasonable at first sight but which are to be considered with caution, with the most prominent ones being imitation and integration. Imitating the rhetoric and policy proposals of populist parties makes their arguments acceptable within mainstream political discourse. It is also questionable whether this strategy bears any fruit, as the electorate often prefers the "original" over a mainstream political party turned populist.

9.   Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. On the Political. New York.

Correspondingly, integrating populist parties into government in order to expose discrepancies between their programmes and their actual policies can have detrimental effects. Power does not necessarily lead to moderation. Instead, this strategy of containment can accelerate societal polarisation and shift the political discourse towards an even more radical direction. It could also potentially cause direct policy impacts, which would, of course, be even worse

Conclusion

The snapshot of populist movements in three key EU member states, all of which will be (or have been) facing major elections this year, shows that populist movements have country-specific dynamics and factors but yet share systemic characteristics which need to be understood in order to counter their illiberal activities. Populists are tapping into increasing anti-establishment, anti-European sentiments in France, which has long been battling the rise of the Front National, in Italy, a country prone to populist movements, and in Germany, which has seen relatively little populist success since World War II. Yet despite these different national contexts, populist movements in all three countries have been able to mobilise portions of the electorate who are disillusioned with traditional party policies in order to put pressure on traditional parties to shift their agendas.

Populists have recently been gaining momentum and feeling that their time has finally come on this side of the Atlantic as well. At the same time, the rise of populism and the declining trust in politics and politicians among citizens are two closely linked phenomena which need to be addressed together. So the most pressing question is: how can the hearts and minds of the people be reached?

Especially for progressives, it is necessary to take a clear stance and lead the counter-movement. It also needs to be stressed that, whilst addressing social inequalities and implementing social policies is helpful in the long-term battle against populism, this alone is no recipe for victory. Social policies have to be complemented by convincing answers to the cultural backlash and sound communication strategies that implement emotional messages.

Progressives need to acknowledge that populists are not the only ones responsible for our crises in recent times: democratic actors all over Europe are displaying a profound lack of inspiration, and the centre-left is lacking in charismatic leading figures. Hence, progressives should focus first and foremost on developing a new attitude that centres on their strengths. This needs to go hand in hand with a new and inspiring narrative of substantial change for the better. To put the six strategies we have outlined into one single sentence: **Progressives need to provide a positive narrative, use clearer language, be more emotional, connect with voters on a more personal level, promote constitutional patriotism, renew political representation and work towards reducing the amount of media coverage given to populists.** A crucial way to foster this is to intensify transnational exchange and mutual learning amongst democratic and progressive actors all over Europe.

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