

In 2018, Europe's Populist Challenges Will Continue

14 December 2017



[Professor Matthew Goodwin](#)

Visiting Senior Fellow, Europe Programme

Despite the 'Macron moment', traditional politics remains under pressure across the continent.



A Five

Star Movement supporter in Rome. Photo: Getty Images.

There is no doubt that nationalist populism will remain an important driver of Europe's debates. As we showed in our 2017 [Chatham House research paper on the future of Europe](#), elites across the EU identify populists as their number one challenge. Thus, as we leave 2017 it seems that many observers were too optimistic about the 'Macron moment' and the supposed defeat of nationalist populism that was reflected in losses for Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

Indeed, as Macron's popularity plunged, Austria swung sharply to the right, electing the young conservative Sebastian Kurz, who has entered negotiations to form a coalition deal with the hard-right Freedom Party. Then, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) captured 12.6 per cent of the vote and 94 seats in the Bundestag in Germany's federal elections, the strongest result for populism in the country's post-war history and one that overturned the assumption that such parties could not find success in the country that gave birth to National Socialism.

Certainly, if Angela Merkel forges another grand coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats, this would almost certainly leave the AfD in the eyes of many voters as the only alternative to the mainstream (while Merkel herself is under pressure from internal party critics to move to the right). Of course, these talks may fail, in which case Germany will have fresh elections or a minority administration.

All of these events reflect deeper currents that are swirling below European politics. The general story is one of party systems that have become more fragmented, volatile and less predictable. This instability is reflected in the fact that it took 208 days to form a coalition government in the Netherlands, and that Germany still does not have one.

Indeed, [recent research](#) suggests that Europe's political systems have never before been so unstable, with record levels of vote-switching and a loss of support for the mainstream, while value divides between nationalists and cosmopolitans are becoming as important as the traditional divide between left and right.

Revealing national elections

These challenges will be reflected in elections next year in Italy, Hungary and Sweden. Each of these will, in their own way, underscore the ongoing challenge to the liberal consensus and the EU from a variety of anti-establishment, Eurosceptic or overtly populist parties.

Italy is the most significant, not least because of its vulnerable financial markets and a highly fragmented political landscape. The incumbent centre-left is being squeezed by the proudly populist Five Star Movement and an alliance of right-wing populist parties. Luigi Di Maio and Five Star have been first in the past 13 consecutive polls while the right-wing Forza Italia, Northern League (which is now polling strongly outside of its historic northern bastions) and Brothers of Italy currently have sufficient support to form a coalition.

They benefit largely from public anger over the refugee crisis and growing unease over EU membership. In one recent survey, less than 40 per cent of Italians felt that their EU membership was beneficial, putting them bottom of the pile of member states – an ominous sign ahead of an election that will see populist politicians jockeying for position.

Tribes of Europe: How Europeans View the EU and its Future

Tribes of Europe, a new piece of research by Chatham House's Europe Programme, explores cross-national attitudes to the future of the EU. The panel analyse the make-up of these tribes.

In Hungary, meanwhile, the latest poll puts Viktor Orbán and the increasingly populist-right Fidesz on a sobering 57 per cent of the vote. (Combined with the ultra-right Jobbik, the two right-wing parties poll a striking 70 per cent.) This will not only

sustain eastern opposition to the EU's handling of the refugee crisis, bolstering those who call for Europe to move in a more conservative direction, but also renew fears over democratic backsliding.

Sweden's election is perhaps less consequential and may well see a continuation of the current government led by the Social Democrats. But the vote share for the populist Sweden Democrats will be an indicator of how the refugee crisis and anti-establishment sentiment continues to ripple through northern Europe.

A question of identity

Central to each of these, and to Europe's agenda overall, is identity politics. As we showed in another 2017 [Chatham House briefing](#) on the ['tribes' of Europe](#), many voters remain instinctively sceptical about how the EU is managing not only immigration and the refugee crisis but also European integration more generally. Indeed, while there is cautious optimism about economic growth and the eurozone, in the latest [Eurobarometer survey](#) that tracks public opinion across the continent most voters say that immigration and terrorism are key priorities.

If the EU is to really erode the appeal of populist parties then it will need to resolve this underlying angst over refugees, borders and security.

The Brexit dimension

Such issues also run through the ongoing Brexit negotiations. Nearly 18 months after the referendum, there is little evidence that Brits are changing their minds. Though they have become more pessimistic about the economic effects of Brexit, and they are more dissatisfied with the Conservative government's handling of the negotiations, they remain deeply polarized.

In the latest poll, 44 per cent of voters feel that the decision was right, 45 per cent feel it was wrong and 11 per cent are unsure. Despite minor fluctuations, few of which extend beyond the 3-point margin of error, these numbers have remained remarkably static since the vote (just 15 per cent want to overturn Brexit entirely).

While major shifts in public opinion are unlikely, the recent government defeat on an amendment to the EU Withdrawal Bill has given MPs a legal guarantee of a vote on the final Brexit deal struck with the EU. Though rebels are divided about what they want, this will inject even more volatility into an already unstable process, perhaps uniting the anti-Brexiteers and paving the way for a showdown of greater significance.