



## Rising Euroscepticism in Europe: An Assessment

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Euroscepticism has coexisted with the process of European integration since its beginning. Since, the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, the migration crisis in 2015 and the Brexit vote in 2016 a new phase of the anti-EU sentiments have emerged. It has - more than ever before - brought to the forefront issues of transnational economic and migrants redistribution and has increased political contestation in and about the European Union (EU). Prior to 2008, Euroscepticism was mostly an expression of public protest limited to parties on the margins of their political systems; it has now developed into a widespread phenomenon with far-reaching implications for the EU. This study tries to analyse the phenomena of rising Euroscepticism. It looks at the basic understanding of Euroscepticism, causes for its rise and in what ways the nation-states are challenging the fabric of EU.

### **Understanding the Rise of Euroscepticism**

The most comprehensive definition of Euroscepticism was provided by Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak.<sup>1</sup> For them, Euroscepticism can be defined in two ways - 'hard Euroscepticism' and 'soft Euroscepticism'. The former denotes a principled opposition towards the EU and European integration, most apparent in political parties that advocate their country's withdrawal from EU membership. These parties recommend a fundamental re-construction of the relations between their country and the EU which is incompatible with the laws and policies within the EU, connoting a de facto opposition to EU membership. On the other hand, Soft Euroscepticism denotes opposition to one or a number of EU-policies and does not imply a principled objection to European integration or EU membership per se. Soft Eurosceptic parties express a qualified opposition to the EU, for instance, based on a sense of opposition towards an issue of national interest. This characterization of Euroscepticism, as either soft or hard, provides an approach from which one can understand the different qualities and variants of Euroscepticism.

Eurosceptic parties tend to view European integration as an encroaching, bureaucratic and elitist phenomenon and have been critical of the top-down nature of the European integration process. Accordingly, Euroscepticism serves to undermine constructs and values, such as the nation-state, national identity and state sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> The main reasons for the rise of Euroscepticism have been notions that integration weakens national sovereignty and the nation state; that the EU is too bureaucratic and elite-driven; it encourages high levels of migration; or it is a neoliberal organisation which benefits the business elite at the expense of the working class.

However, the most important reason for the rise of euroscepticism relates to the rise of populist-style politics in Europe. Euroscepticism as an issue is used by both populist right and left-wing parties, but is pre-dominantly associated with the right-wing. There is an inherent difference in the approaches of the two political spectrums in their use of Euroscepticism. The populist left Eurosceptic parties oppose the EU on the basis of socio-economic concerns, whereas the right-wing populist parties reject EU integration on the basis of sovereignty arguments and cultural claims.<sup>3</sup> The populist parties in the Netherlands (Party for Freedom, Socialist Party), Belgium (Vlaams Belang), Denmark (Dansk Folkeparti), Greece (Golden Dawn, Syriza), Italy (Lega Nord, 5 Stars Movement), have provided the European region with a degree of political and electoral unpredictability. More recently, the support gained by the far-right, nationalist and Eurosceptic parties such as German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), French Front National, Austria's Freedom Movement, Swedish Social Democrats and Danish Dansk Folkeparti, indicates that electoral support can be reached by declaring the need to safeguard the nation state and sovereignty from external influences such as elite-driven policy making in Brussels. However, the mainstream parties have largely been supportive of the EU, along with its integration policies. This has provided these parties reason to voice popular dissent and protest against developments that they consider erode the sovereignty of the state.

### **Euroscepticism Today**

Eurobarometer surveys of EU citizens show that trust in the EU and its institutions has declined since a peak in 2007. Since then it has been consistently below 50%. A 2009 survey showed that support for EU membership was lowest in Latvia, the United Kingdom (UK) and Hungary. By 2016, the countries viewing the EU most unfavourably were Greece, France, Spain and the UK. A referendum on continued EU membership was held in the UK in 2016, which resulted in a 51.9% vote in favour of leaving the EU. Since then, trust in the EU has risen slightly in most EU countries as a consequence of falling unemployment rates and accelerating economic growth. According to the Eurobarometer Polls of Spring 2018, two-thirds of Europeans believe their country has benefited from being a member of the EU, the highest percentage since 1983 and an increase of three percentage points since 2017. In addition 60% of Europeans consider EU membership a good thing. Levels of support for the EU have gone up in 26 of the bloc's 28 member countries, the exceptions being Germany and the United Kingdom which recorded 2% decrease in support. However, when it comes to the longer term, overall, more Europeans think the bloc is headed in the wrong direction (42%) than in the right direction (32%).<sup>4</sup>

### ***Brexit Referendum***

On the political front, the EU is plagued by deep divisions over how to shape its future. The Brexit referendum of 2016 represented the worst-case scenario for the European Union in terms of impact of Euroscepticism. Britain had a transactional relationship with the Union, as the membership was evaluated in terms of costs and benefits. Moreover, as a latecomer, Britain often found the EU's organisation and policies incompatible to its interests. British politics has always included a faction (UKIP and section of Conservative members) that had been sceptical of deeper integration with the rest of Europe. This faction has grown stronger as the EU has struggled with the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The two most common arguments in favour of Brexit focused on the EU's liberal rules for internal migration and the EU's burdensome economic regulations. While arguments about economic regulation and political sovereignty dominate the intellectual case for Brexit, the political appeal of Brexit relied heavily on the issue of immigration. Brexit not only changed the internal political atmosphere, but it had crucial political repercussions within the EU and on its relations with other countries. It became evident after the Brexit vote that Euroscepticism draws strength from opposition to mass immigration, cultural liberalisation, and the perceived surrender of national sovereignty to distant and unresponsive international bodies.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Euroscepticism in Western Europe***

The Brexit referendum illustrated a wider challenge to the Union in the form of anti-EU parties that were well entrenched in most member states. Particularly in Western Europe, large-scale immigration provided an ideal climate for the growth of parties that were hostile to the EU and associate European integration with threats to their countries' sovereignty, culture, security and welfare states. Although these parties have been part of their respective political scenes, their average vote share in national and European elections has more than doubled since the 1960s, rising from 5.1% to 13.2%, while their share of seats has tripled. Moreover, in recent years, they have joined governing coalitions in many Western democracies. Such parties also have powerful indirect effects on politics in EU states, fundamentally reshaping patterns of political competition by pushing the mainstream parties rightwards.<sup>6</sup>

Latest examples of this phenomenon is of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which won 12.6% of the vote and entered the Bundestag with 94 seats, upsetting Germany's post-war political order. Domestic terrorist attacks carried out by immigrants, as well as the refugee crisis, have shifted the mood of the German population from pro-EU outlook to rising scepticism of German-EU relations. This rise of Euroscepticism in large parts of Germany has arguably provided the AfD with influence in the country's political environment. Also, in October 2017, another Eurosceptic party was not only able to get substantial votes but became member of the coalition government. The Freedom Party of Austria won 26% of the popular vote, up from 20.5% in 2013, and joined the governing coalition with the People's Party. It was not the first time that the Freedom party has been in government. It was part of a coalition government between 2000 and 2005, however, at that time there was uproar among EU leaders for the inclusion of the far-right party in the governing coalition and in protest the diplomatic relations were frozen. However, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has repeatedly said his government will be pro-European despite including the

FPO, which was founded by former Nazis and campaigned against Austria joining the bloc when it was put to a referendum in 1994.<sup>7</sup>

In the Italian elections of March 2018, the big winner was the populist Five Star Movement, which formed a coalition with the anti-EU Lega party. The elections and formation of a populist right-wing government follows the rise of nationalist parties in Central-Eastern Europe, the right-wing turn in Austria and Brexit. It added to a growing movement which rejects what Europe has become in the decades following the end of the Cold War, as well as its ideological underpinnings. The two halves of the new coalition – the Lega and the M5S – disagree on many issues, but they are united in blaming Italy’s problems on the European Union. Italy’s new government has started its mandate on a collision course with Europe, as top ministers from the Lega and the Five Star Movement threatened to take a harsher line on migrants and implement a number of spending measures. More recently is the case of Swedish elections of September 2018, where the Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant party Swedish Democrats was able to win substantial votes (17.6% up from 13% in 2014). During the campaign, the party called to hold a referendum over whether Sweden should leave the EU. The leader of the party, Jimmie Åkesson, demanded that the government grant the people of Sweden a referendum on whether or not to remain in the EU following the national election by saying the EU had become “a major force of corruption where nobody has control over anything”.<sup>8</sup> The run-up to the elections in Sweden showed that the wave of anti-EU feelings is catching up in countries that were known to be most stable, democratically.

### ***Challenge from Central and Eastern Europe***

The unfolding political scenario in Central and Eastern Europe has the potential to create further division in the EU. Some of the member states are accused of openly defying EU norms and values. In Central and Eastern Europe, Eurosceptic governments in Hungary and Poland have intensified their efforts to weaken core liberal institutions such as a free press, independent civil society, and constitutional courts. These countries are increasingly defining their national identity in exclusionary ethnic and religious terms. The governments of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary (also known as Visegrad countries) are refusing to accept EU law or implement decisions on migration issues. Although governments in Poland and Hungary are not identical in their political outlook, both governments frequently strike nationalistic and Eurosceptic tones. Their politics has irritated France and Germany who are keen to push forward with a new era of European integration but Hungary and Poland have made it clear that they have a different vision for European integration. Their crackdown on civil society, the media and courts has already put them on a collision course with the EU, which has begun extraordinary disciplinary measures against these countries. The differences with Poland and Hungary are an “unprecedented test” for Brussels because of its potential to thwart other member states’ agendas in areas ranging from migration to the rule of law. It may be tricky to find a consensus over how to deal with these countries given that many Eurosceptic and right-wing populist parties have now joined other European governments.<sup>9</sup> Still, the European Commission has taken the

exceptional step of triggering the Article 7<sup>1</sup> process against Poland and has recently concluded a vote to trigger the same against Hungary.

### **Conclusion**

Victory of Emmanuel Macron in French presidential elections of 2017 revived hope for a stronger and united Europe, stemming doubts over the rising anti-EU sentiments. As pro-EU leader, he advocated reforms not only in France but also the EU to make it more coherent and consistent. Similar sentiments were visible in the New Year's Eve speech to the nation by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, where she outlined a vision for her fourth term that included an alliance with French President Emmanuel Macron to strengthen Europe's economic clout and control migration, while upholding values of tolerance and pluralism within the EU and abroad. However, the recent elections in many European countries and the challenges posed by several member-states to the fabric of EU shows that there is significant disagreement over the vision of what the future of EU will be.

The rise of Euroscepticism in Europe and its impact upon voters and the public opinion at large within the EU member states is undeniable. Despite the fact that the EU attempts to advocate for a higher level of European cooperation to improve common economic, social and political measures, many parties continue to lobby for Euroscepticism. The presence and success of Eurosceptic parties have profound repercussion for the ways in which political parties with governing experience deal with the issue of European integration. The electoral success of Eurosceptic parties and the emphasis on the EU issue by the radical right and left-wing has resulted in strategic responses from mainstream parties. This suggests that Euroscepticism does not only matter in extreme cases — such as in the case of Brexit, but has a profound impact on the functioning of EU politics, both within member states and in Brussels.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism Volume 1: Case Studies and Country Surveys*, (Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, Oxford University Press), 2008, pp.7-8

<sup>2</sup> Hainsworth, Paul (2008), *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, (Routledge: London), pp. 82

<sup>3</sup>Dr. Maurits J. Meijers, *Radical Right and Radical Left Euroscepticism: A Dynamic Phenomenon*, Policy Paper 191, Jacques Delors Institut, Berlin, 7 April 2017

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<sup>1</sup> Article 7 is a mechanism of the Lisbon Treaty that ensures “all EU countries respect the common values of the EU.” It was envisaged as a way to mitigate and prevent member states from backsliding on European values and the rule law. The mechanism is triggered when there is “a clear risk” of an EU member state breaching the bloc's fundamental values, which include: “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.”

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<sup>4</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 89, “Europeans and the future of Europe”, Spring 2018, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2180>

<sup>5</sup> The Rise of European Populism and the Collapse of the Centre Left, Brookings, 8 March 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/08/the-rise-of-european-populism-and-the-collapse-of-the-center-left/>

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Raines, Matthew Goodwin and David Cutts, *The Future of Europe Comparing Public and Elite Attitudes*, Chatham House, June 2017,

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-06-20-future-europe-attitudes-raines-goodwin-cutts-final.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Austrian conservatives bring far right into government, *Reuters*, 15 December 2017,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-politics/austrian-conservatives-bring-far-right-into-government-idUSKBN1E928K>

<sup>8</sup> Swedish Populist Leader Calls for Referendum on EU Membership in Next Four Years, *Breitbart*, 19 June 2018,

<https://www.breitbart.com/london/2018/06/19/swedish-populist-leader-calls-referendum-eu-membership/>

<sup>9</sup> Europe at a crossroads: will the EU survive 2018?, *The Week*, 5 June 2018, <http://www.theweek.co.uk/in-depth/90746/europe-at-a-crossroads-will-the-eu-survive-2018>