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Policy brief

An ELN Quick-Guide: The Foreign and Security Policies of Populist Parties in Europe

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Introduction

From 22nd to 25th May European citizens will be casting their vote in elections for the European Parliament (EP). The clear pre-election trend is one of growing support¹ for populist parties on both the right and left. But what do these parties think in terms of foreign and security policy and how do they line up against some of the most pressing issues on the foreign policy agenda of Europe? What might be the implications of their growth for the long-term goal of a Europe that is cohesive and cooperative in nature?

This ELN quick-guide seeks to offer answers to these questions by providing a snapshot of the populist parties' views. We have examined 8 of the main parties fighting elections this week, drawn from 8 countries. The parties reviewed are UKIP in the UK, the Front National (NF) in France, Syriza in Greece, the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party (DPP) in Denmark, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy and The Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), in Hungary.

Each party is examined for its views on the following foreign policy issues:

- Attitude towards the European Union;
- Attitude to the euro as common currency;
- Attitude to Putin's Russia;
- Attitude to membership of NATO;
- Attitude to relations with the US;
- Attitude to other high profile issues like the Middle East and international development policy.

The results show some common positions in the various party platforms, and not only on issues where this might be expected, such as on policy toward the EU. They also show some interesting divisions and differences. In the material below, we review the headline findings of our analysis issue by issue.

We conclude this quick-guide with some reflections on the possible implications of a strong populist vote in the imminent elections.

1 Wintour, P, 2014, 'Anti-EU vote could rise above 30% in European elections, says thinktank', The Guardian, Accessed online: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/apr/28/anti-eu-vote-european-elections-thinktank>, 16/05/2014

Populist Party Positions by Issue

Issue 1: Attitude to the European Union

The key similarity between all the parties is their distrust and open criticism of the European Union. In fact, all of the reviewed parties advocate either for exit from the Union, or for radical changes to EU policies and/or for a significant shifting of decision making authority away from Brussels to national legislative bodies. Of the parties we reviewed, UKIP, and the PVV in the Netherlands both call for their countries to leave the EU altogether.

The other parties are all heavily Euro-sceptic but stop short of calling for exit. The position of the Danish People's Party is typical in this regard. It opposes the introduction of what it calls a 'European political union' and argues Denmark should remain a sovereign state. Jobbik has argued that Hungary's membership of the EU has damaged the country's economy and as a consequence is in favour of a referendum on amending Hungary's EU Accession Treaty. The Front National in France argues for reduced 'supranational' powers for the EU. Its leader, Marine Le Pen, has argued that it is the 'duty of patriots to vote against Brussels'². Her attitude finds echoes in the positions of the FPÖ in Austria, and the M5S in Italy. Syriza in Greece, while not calling for Greek exit from the EU, has been scathing about what it sees as the latter's slavish adherence to neo-liberal economic orthodoxy.

Detailed ideas on how the EU should be radically reformed are few and far between within these parties. However, four of the reviewed parties, namely the Front National, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Jobbik and the M5S, support a reversion to trade agreements between countries in Europe that would only serve what they call 'national interests' and these agreements, by implication, would be blended with some sort of protectionism. Another theme highlighted by many of the parties on the right is the need to combat immigration including in some instances by restricting free movement of labour within the EU.

Issue 2: Attitude to the euro as common currency

Only two of the parties reviewed, namely the Front National in France and the Freedom Party in the Netherlands (PVV), support outright withdrawal from the euro as a common currency. However, the FPÖ in Austria states that the party would not oppose a negotiated break-up or re-structuring of the euro, possibly into northern and southern European variants and the M5S movement in Italy supports a referendum on Italy exiting the euro.³ Three of the other parties in our review, (UKIP, Jobbik and the DPP) operate in countries that have never adopted the euro (namely the UK, Hungary, and Denmark) and oppose entry to it.

2 Carnegie, H (2014), Marine Le Pen launches European campaign with attack on EU, The Financial Times, Accessed online: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5907b5a6-d128-11e3-bdbb-00144feabdc0.html#axzz31c3u0y4S>, 14/05/2014

3 See: And Now Beppe Grillo wants Italians to vote on Leaving the Euro, Business Insider, March 3rd 2013, Accessed online: <http://www.businessinsider.com/beppe-grillo-supports-euro-referendum-2013-3> 19/05/2014.

Syriza in Greece is the exception. It favours Greece continuing in the single currency but with radical changes to the EU's overall fiscal and monetary policies and an end to 'austerity'.

Issue 3: Attitude to Putin's Russia

A less noted feature of the positions of many of the populist parties in Europe is their favourable attitude to President Putin's Russia. The only party among those reviewed arguing that Russia's approach to the crisis in Ukraine may be contributing to tensions with the West is the PVV in the Netherlands.

All of the other parties we reviewed agreed that the current EU attitude to Russia is not the right way to handle the crisis in Ukraine. All of them, though to varying degrees, place the blame for the current crisis in EU diplomatic relations with Russia on the EU itself.

Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP, has talked of a 'reckless EU foreign policy' towards Russia and described President Putin as the world leader he most admires.⁴ The Front National has said it enjoys 'good relations'⁵ with the Russian administration and its leaders have made several trips to Moscow in recent months to develop those relations further. Syriza in Greece argues that Russia should be a strategic partner. Its leader, Alexis Tsipras also said on a recent trip to Moscow that sanctions against Russia would only harm Europe⁶. And Jobbik in Hungary claims it already is a strong partner of Russia⁷. The Front National, the FPÖ in Austria and Jobbik also sent observers during the Crimea status referendum and later recognised the vote there as legitimate.

Issue 4: Attitude to NATO membership

All of the countries covered in our analysis, apart from Austria, are members of the NATO Alliance. The Austrian FPÖ is in favour of maintaining Austria's position of military neutrality and therefore opposes membership in any military alliances.

Of the other parties we reviewed, both the Front National and Syriza in Greece favour exit from NATO. The latter favours closure of all foreign bases on its territory and initiation of unspecified Balkan and wider Mediterranean security cooperation.

4 See The Guardian, Monday 31st March for the comment about Putin, accessed online <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/31/farage-i-admire-putin> Accessed online on 16/05/2014. UKIP Official Website, 2014, 'Nigel Farage steps up his criticism of reckless EU foreign policy', Accessed online http://www.ukip.org/nigel_farage_steps_up_his_criticism_of_reckless_eu_foreign_policy, 16/05/2014

5 Ames, P. 2014, Europe's far right is rootin' for Putin', Globalpost, Accessed online at: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/europe/140409/europe-far-right-rootin-for-putin>, 25/04/2014

6 See: <http://www.enetenglish.gr/?i=news.en.article&id=1920> Accessed 19/05/2014.

7 See: Putin's Western Allies: Why Europe's Far Right is on the Kremlin's Side, Foreign Affairs, Accessed online, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141067/mitchell-a-orenstein/putins-western-allies> 16/05/2014.

All the other parties favour continued NATO membership but some differ on what this might ultimately mean in practice. The PVV in the Netherlands, for example, favours exclusion of Turkey from the Alliance. UKIP sees NATO as important to UK defence but believes the UK, and the alliance, needs to end its track-record of overseas interventions and focus on territorial defence of alliance members.

Issue 5: Attitude to Relations with the US

Both the French Front National and Greece's Syriza are hostile to US policy and favour an alternative orientation to the current alliance with the US. The Front National is trying to disassociate France from an 'Atlanticist drift'⁸.

Beyond these two parties, however, all the others we reviewed have more moderate views on collaboration with the US, seeing this as a necessary follow on from their support for NATO.

That said, most of the other parties oppose negotiation of a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the US, not because they oppose free trade agreements in principle but because they believe such trade agreements should be a national rather than 'supranational' EU prerogative.⁹ Even though UKIP and the PVV have chosen to formally remain neutral on the matter, all parties have said that they would prefer if the agreement was negotiated bilaterally between national leaderships.

Issue 6: Other Notable Positions

Some of the parties reviewed here have notable views on the politics of the Middle East and also on international development policy.

On the former, the PVV in the Netherlands offers unconditional support for Israel, which its leader Geert Wilders has in the past described as 'the central front in the defence of the West.... against Islam'¹⁰. Jobbik in Hungary on the other hand, is strongly anti-Israel and in favour of deepening relations with the Arab states and with Iran.

On international development issues, several of the parties reviewed appear to formulate policy on the basis of what might be described as national historical association or economic self-interest.

8 Le Pen, M, 2014, Conférence de presse internationale de marine le pen en présence daymeric chauprade, géopoliticien,[transcript], Accessed online: <http://www.marinelepen.fr/2014/01/conference-de-presse-internationale-de-marine-le-pen-en-presence-daymeric-chauprade-geopoliticien/>, 16/05/2014

9 Emmott, R, 2014, 'Populist gains to complicate Europe's free trade ambitions', Reuters, Accessed online: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/05/13/uk-eu-election-trade-idUKK-BN0DT12Y20140513>, 16/05/2014

10 See: The Rise of Outsider Parties in the 2014 EU Elections, published by the Henry Jackson Society, London, May 2014, p.63.

UKIP, the Front National and the PVV for example, all favour major cuts to development aid. However, the PVV, drawing from the Netherlands' past role and interest in the African continent, argues that the aid that is provided should be focused on that continent. Similarly, the FN's readiness to support development aid does not extend beyond providing assistance to some of France's former colonies in Africa. The FN leader, Marine Le Pen, has also argued that aid should not be made dependent on democratic governance in recipient countries but should instead be tied to direct economic collaboration with France. This is in direct contradiction of the current developmental approach of the EU as a whole.

Possible Implications

We do not suggest that the parties reviewed in this short paper are about to dominate the positions of the European Union, NATO or the national governments of the countries in question. The surge in support for such parties is strong but not strong enough to produce this effect and nor are the European Parliament elections central enough to the politics of Europe to generate such a result. National elections are still far more important.

Once the European elections are over, however, the voice of the parties we have reviewed is almost certain to increase. In the European Parliament, views such as those described here will be heard more often and more loudly than they have been before. The parties may also be able to form groupings in the European Parliament sufficient to ensure a measure of funding is provided to them and this could assist them in a further phase of growth.

Other important consequences may follow. Mainstream parties would be well advised to take steps to strengthen the political legitimacy and popularity of the European project as a whole but they have a history of responding to populist challenges instead by altering their own positions to make them align more closely with those of their challengers. One of the consequences of a surge in support for populist parties in the European elections could therefore be a general toughening of mainstream attitudes towards the European Union and the European project overall, and not only a toughening of attitudes on immigration and people movement issues. This could further weaken the political foundations of European integration and undermine efforts to agree a common European foreign and defence policy, as well as the EU's approach to international development policy.

Given that the European parliament itself has become more influential in EU policy-making in recent years it also cannot be discounted that there will be effects in some areas of EU policy over time, though here the effect will depend on how the populist parties not only seek to work together but on the success they have in working with other political groupings in the parliament.

If a further wave of crisis were to hit the euro-zone, the politics of managing that crisis in the domestic environments of several states could be impacted by the growth of populist parties with serious consequences. This could be especially true if further austerity measures were attempted by European governments.

And outside of the EU, some countries could see serious challenges to their NATO membership in the medium-term as a result of increased support for such parties. This is

perhaps most notably an issue in Greece where Syriza is the main opposition party and is currently polling strongly.

Last but not least, it is possible that Russian influence in the domestic politics of several European states could increase if the popularity of the parties we have reviewed, and others like them, continues to increase.

About the Authors

Dr Ian Kearns is the co-Founder and Director of the European Leadership Network (ELN). Previously, Ian was Acting Director and Deputy Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in the UK and Deputy Chair of the IPPR's independent All-Party Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, serving under co-chairs, Lord George Robertson and Lord Paddy Ashdown. In 2013 he co-edited *Influencing Tomorrow: Future Challenges for British Foreign Policy* with Douglas Alexander M.P., the Shadow Foreign Secretary. He also served in 2010 as a Specialist Adviser to the Joint House of Commons/House of Lords Committee on National Security Strategy. Ian has over twenty years of experience working on foreign and security policy issues and has published on a wide range of issues including Britain's 'special relationship' with the US, nuclear non-proliferation, the enlargement of the European Union, conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and the security situation in Northern Ireland. He is former Director of the Graduate Programme in International Studies at the University of Sheffield, a former Director in the Global Government Industry Practice at Electronic Data Systems (EDS), and a regular media commentator on domestic and international security. Recent media appearances include BBC Newsnight, BBC World Service Newshour, Radio 4's Today Programme, The Politics Show, Sky News, Channel 4 News and BBC World Television. Ian has also written for print and periodical outlets such as The Independent, The Daily Telegraph, the New Statesman and Prospect magazine.

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