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# Euroscepticism and Nationalist Populism

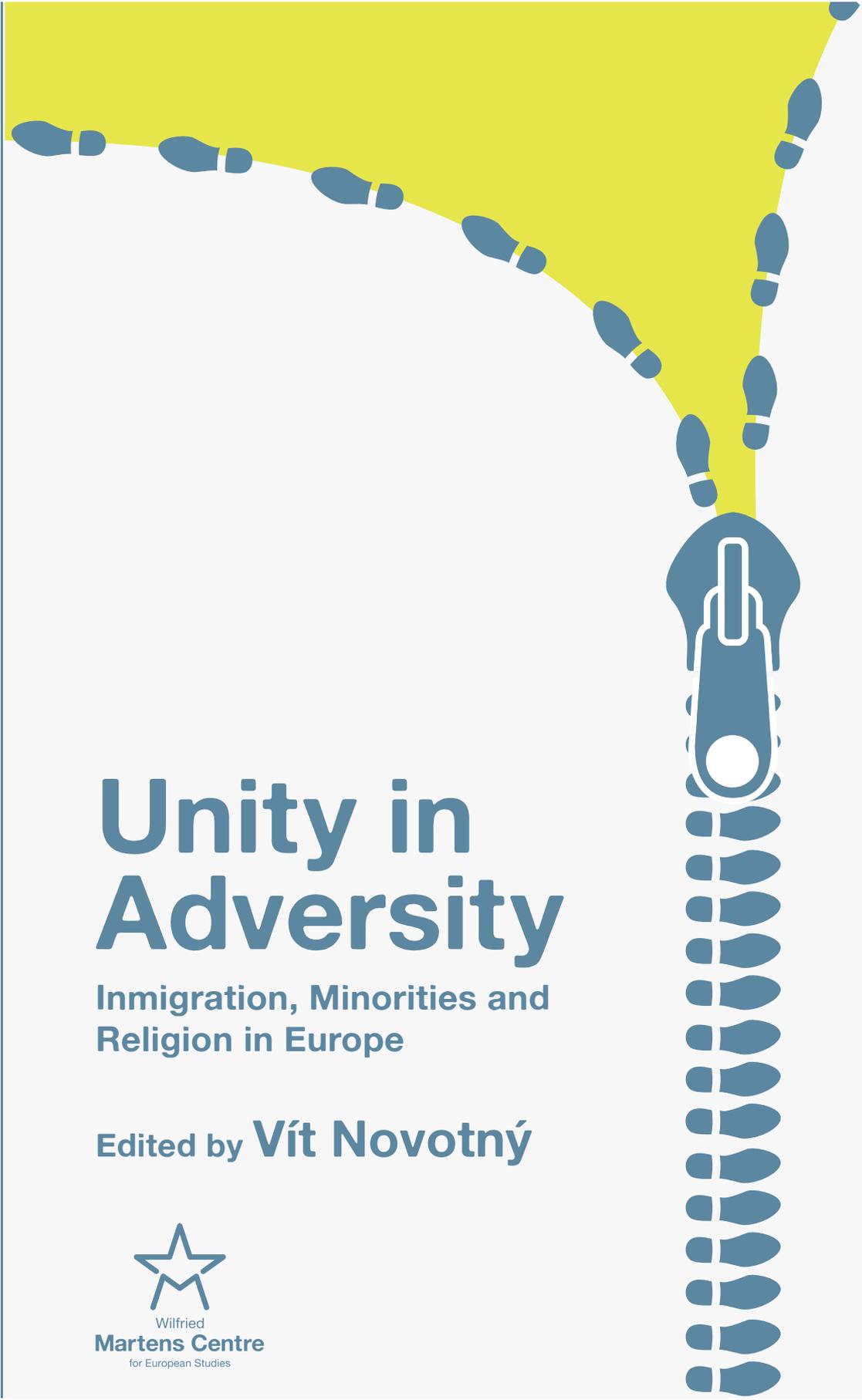
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# Unity in Adversity

Immigration, Minorities and Religion in Europe

Edited by **Vít Novotný**



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies

**Unity in Adversity:  
Immigration, Minorities and Religion in Europe**

Vít Novotný  
Editor



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# Euroscepticism and Nationalist Populism<sup>90</sup>

**Antonis Klapsis and Panagiotis Kakolyris**

*Recommended by Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy, Athens, Greece.*

**Abstract** In recent years Eurosceptic parties have gained significant ground in national and European Parliament elections in many EU countries. This trend is related to the effects of the ongoing economic crisis, which has drastically affected the political and electoral behaviour of citizens across Europe. The increased migrant and refugee flows to the EU from African and Asian countries have also played a significant role in the growing success of the above-mentioned parties. Nationalist and populist voices have gained strength as public perceptions of European integration seem to have changed for the worse. In many cases, Eurosceptic political parties are calling for the dissolution of the EU or at least a curtailing of its ultra-national character. The chapter recommends that mainstream parties deal with the issues raised by the populist parties rather than tackling populism as a political opponent, and that they use simpler—but not simplistic—language.

## INTRODUCTION

A spectre is haunting Europe. But it is not the spectre of Communism that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed to in 1848. It is that of Euroscepticism, combined with a mixture of nationalism and populism, and it can be observed practically all over Europe. Despite national or other local differences, in almost all EU countries Eurosceptic political parties have gained and continue to gain ground. This is not simply a coincidence; it is a trend that is unlikely to disappear soon because it is a symptom of a far larger crisis. This trend is reflected in electoral results across Europe. Thus, a major question emerges: what can pro-European parties do to defeat Eurosceptic parties?

## THE CRISIS AND ITS CAUSES

Ever since the establishment of the European Communities in the 1950s, the project of European integration has been based on two major pillars: on the one hand securing peace and stability, and on the other, ensuring prosperity for the European nations. The horrifying legacy of the two World Wars, which had devastated Europe, was still fresh in the minds of most Europeans in the middle of the twentieth century. Despite the difficulties, in the decades that followed,

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90 Research for this study was concluded in December 2015. Later events are not analysed here.

the European project managed to thrive. Six and a half decades after the signing of the Treaty of Paris of 1951, the EU has expanded to most parts of Europe: from Portugal to Poland, and from Ireland to Cyprus. But at the same time, the political forces that oppose European integration have also been gaining ground all over Europe: clearly this is not just a coincidence. Eurosceptic voices are not something new, as they have existed for many decades. However, it is only in the last few years that they have grown so much and, fuelled by nationalist populism, have become so loud and, due to the circumstances, been able to challenge both pillars of European integration.

Euroscepticism has benefited from the negative effects of the economic crisis, which started in the US in 2007–8 and very soon spread to the rest of the world, including Europe. Economic stagnation led to an increase in unemployment and consequently to a fall in living standards among a large proportion of the population. As a result, political parties which either oppose European integration in general or which would like to see the EU evolving into a loose trade zone have managed to increase their popularity, even though the economic crisis is not the only reason for their success. Their rejection of the concept of an ever closer union is directly related to their nationalist ideological background, which makes them perceive the EU as a supranational organisation that undermines nation states' power and authority. The EU's inability to respond effectively to the economic crisis has created fertile ground for the unprecedented success of Eurosceptic parties across Europe: according to their narrative, which has proven to be appealing to a great part of the European electorate, the EU and the euro are not the answers to the problem, but rather major parts of the problem itself.<sup>91</sup> It is definitely no coincidence that European citizens' level of trust in the project of European integration has fallen almost as rapidly as their standard of living.<sup>92</sup> 'Europe is war. Economic war. It is the increase of hostilities between the countries,' Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French National Front (Front National, FN), has argued.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time, the increase of migrant and refugee flows from African and Asian countries to the EU has given additional impetus to Eurosceptic parties, especially far-right ones. Using a black and white argumentation, these parties are taking advantage of economic insecurity and are directly associating the increase of migrant and refugee flows with social problems such as unemployment and criminality. Moreover, they present these flows as a menace to the predominantly Christian character of the European continent, to traditional values and to national security, especially when it comes to Islamist terrorism. In a rapidly changing world, the Eurosceptic parties' nationalist rhetoric sounds like a plausible alternative to the many European citizens who have either been affected by the manifold crises or who are afraid that they will be affected by them. The anti-EU turn in public opinion can be directly associated with Eurosceptic nostalgia for the 'paradise' of lost national sovereignty, which was sacrificed for an EU so distant from the needs of the Europeans themselves.

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91 A. Klapsis, 'Economic Crisis and Political Extremism in Europe: From the 1930s to the Present', *European View* 13/2 (2014).

92 J. I. Torreblanca et al., 'The Continent-Wide Rise of Euroscepticism', European Council on Foreign Affairs Policy Memo (London, May 2013).

93 M. von Rohr, 'Interview with Marine Le Pen: "I Don't Want this European Soviet Union"', *Der Spiegel*, 3 June 2014.

## PARTIES AND ELECTIONS

In order to demonstrate the existence of sufficient common ground for populism, nationalism and Euro-scepticism in different countries, the following selection presents a range of such parties that are playing a key role on the European political scene. The selection provides a balance between geographical and populational representation; governmental and oppositional parties, of long standing and newly arrived, and from the right and the left wing; and from new and old member states, whether or not they are facing a severe economic crisis.

### The UK: under-represented populism

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) was founded in 1993 by members of the Anti-Federalist League, as a result of opposition to the Maastricht Treaty. As its name implies, it has one key policy: to remove the UK from the EU and regain what UKIP describes as the UK's national sovereignty from Brussels. UKIP advocates stopping payments to the EU and withdrawal from EU treaties, while maintaining trading ties with other European countries.<sup>94</sup> It also combines anti-immigration policies with an ultra-conservative social agenda and a mix-and-match economic patchwork of classical liberalism and leftist policies.<sup>95</sup> It has performed increasingly well in European Parliament elections (as seen in Table 1 below), but in general elections, due to the effect of the first-past-the-post voting system, the party has failed to make the breakthrough it has been hoping for. Although it managed to elect just one MP in the 2015 general elections, it secured third place in the overall number of votes. As a result, it has succeeded in imposing an anti-EU sentiment on the political agenda. It broke the ground for the EU referendum in the UK, opening the way for British nationalism. As the only political party openly supporting Brexit, UKIP attained a major victory in the June 2016 EU referendum, paving the way for a historic change in the relationship between the UK and the EU.

**Table 1 UKIP's electoral results (%)**

1999 European elections	7% (3 MEPs)
2001 general election	1.5%
2004 European elections	16% (12 MEPs)
2005 general election	2.3%
2009 European elections	16.5% (13 MEPs)
2010 general election	3.2%
2014 European elections	27.5% (24 MEPs)
2015 general election	12.6% (1 MP)

*Source:* UK, The Electoral Commission, 'Previous UK General Elections'.

<sup>94</sup> UKIP, 'The UKIP Manifesto 2015'.

<sup>95</sup> UKIP, 'Patrick O'Flynn Lays Out UKIP's Economic Plan'.

### France: the family business of populism

The FN was founded in 1972 to unify a variety of French nationalist movements that existed at the time. Jean-Marie Le Pen was its first leader and he managed to gradually pull his party from the margins to the political epicentre. In 2002 he won a surprise second place in the first round of the presidential election, forcing the political mainstream to support Jacques Chirac in the second round. In 2011 Marine Le Pen took over the leadership from her father. Since then she has distanced herself from some of his extreme views, while remaining boldly anti-EU and continuing to present immigration as a threat to France.

Marine Le Pen has managed to gain a prominent role on the political scene while calling for France's exit from the EU, unless it can withdraw from the free movement of people and leave the euro, which the FN claims has failed. In the 2014 European Parliament elections Le Pen broke yet another electoral record, taking first place with 25% of the vote.<sup>96</sup> The attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and Paris by Islamic State boosted her xenophobic rhetoric and subsequently public support for her party. In the first round of the 2015 regional elections the FN came first, garnering roughly 28% of the nationwide vote and leading in 6 of the 13 regions. It may have failed to win a single region, but the FN beat its previous record number of votes, collecting 6,600,253.<sup>97</sup> Once again the entire political mainstream had to forge an alliance to urge the French people into tactical voting in order to avoid a major electoral victory for the FN. But it is clear that although Le Pen's party has been stymied, it is far from defeated.

### Poland: conspiracy theories and authoritarianism

In Poland, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) was founded in 2001 by the Kaczyński brothers, Jarosław and Lech. The party won the 2005 elections and Lech Kaczyński served as president, before his death in a plane crash in 2010. Jarosław, who served for as prime minister from 2006 to 2007, formed an unstable coalition with minor/politically marginal parties. While in opposition (before and after being prime minister) he cultivated conspiracy theories and anti-Russia and anti-EU rhetoric (although he did not suggest a complete withdrawal from the EU). The year 2015 gave the party a double victory: its candidate, Andrzej Duda, was elected president in August and in October PiS won an absolute majority in the Polish parliament's lower house—the first time any party has done so since 1989.<sup>98</sup>

PiS combines a deeply socially conservative stance with a nationalist discourse and a leftist set of economic policies. It promotes some very bold anti-immigrant ideas, for instance, suggesting that the Syrian refugees threaten Poland's Catholic way of life and would bring new diseases to Poland. However at the same time, the party opposes the British plans to limit immigration from EU member states, since more than 800,000 Polish nationals work in the UK. According

96 France, Ministère de l'Intérieur, 'Elections: les résultats'.

97 *L'Express*, 'Régionales: zéro région pour le FN, mais un record de voix historique', 13 December 2015.

98 J. Cienski, '5 Takeaways From Poland's Election', *Politico*, 25 October 2015.

to the opposition, as a governing party, PiS has been trying to impose its political agenda by pushing the boundaries of democracy. It has been accused of trying to manipulate state institutions, causing widespread national and international dismay.<sup>99</sup>

### **Germany: a party that wants Islam out of the country**

For most of its recent history, Germany has been the only major European country without a significant right-wing anti-EU party. The rise of the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) has changed this. Although it came just short of crossing the 5% threshold in the 2013 federal elections, the party did achieve electoral success in the 2014 European Parliament elections, securing 7.1% of the vote a little over a year after its foundation.<sup>100</sup> It has continued its electoral success at the regional level and today, according to the polls, has the support of more than 10% of the public, especially in the eastern part of Germany.

The party's founders were 68 economists, business leaders and journalists. It utilises hard-line nationalist rhetoric. At the time of its founding, the party was mainly critical of the existence of the euro, the use of bailouts by the eurozone and the deepening of the European integration process. It now favours a strong anti-immigration approach. The overheated refugee debate<sup>101</sup> and the threat of an attack by Islamist extremists on German soil have fuelled AfD's political impact, although it is not clear whether, in the long term, the party will maintain its current popularity when the refugee crisis settles down.

### **Greece: populist twins**

In Greece, the economic crisis has had a major influence on political radicalisation and has fertilised populism, nationalism and anti-Europeanism. The party Golden Dawn (Λαϊκός Σύνδεσμος – Χρυσή Αυγή) is a characteristic example, born during the crisis. Until the 2012 elections electoral support for the party had not totalled more than 0.3%. But during the two general elections held in 2012 it won almost 7% of the vote, and this increased to 9.4% in the 2014 European Parliament elections, before falling again to 6.9% in the September 2015 general election. The party became world famous not only for its ultra-nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-EU, vulgar, neo-Nazi rhetoric, but also for the criminal activities of some of its members. A number of its adherents have been known to form so-called battalion squads. In 2012 one of these squads went so far as to kill an anti-fascist rapper musician.<sup>102</sup>

99 *The Guardian*, 'Tens of Thousands March in Warsaw Against "Democratship" Government', 12 December 2015.

100 Germany, Federal Returning Officer, 'Election Results'.

101 *Der Spiegel*, 'Fear, Anger and Hatred: The Rise of Germany's New Right', 11 December 2015.

102 *Electionsnet.org*, 'Τα τελικά αποτελέσματα των βουλευτικών εκλογών' [Results of the Greek General Elections of 20 September 2015]; A. Klapsis, "'Here to Stay?": Golden Dawn, From the Political Margin to the Political Foreground', in K. Ifantis (ed.), *Is Europe Afraid of Europe? An Assessment of the Result of the 2014 European Elections* (Athens: Minoas, 2014).

The economic crisis also fuelled left-wing populism in Greece, represented by the Coalition of the Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς, Syriza),<sup>103</sup> support for which was at 4.13% in 2009, but had reached 35.46% by September 2015. The party denounced Greece's creditors as 'terrorists' and appealed to 'the will of the people' to 'tear up' the bailout agreements with them. Syriza's leader, Alexis Tsipras, preferred to play with people's emotions rather than suggest ways to end the crisis. Following the January 2015 elections, Syriza was the major partner in a coalition government that promised to resist the European austerity measures and to negotiate a 'political solution' to the financial problems of the country. Within six months it had called for a referendum to denounce the proposed agreement by the European Commission. Just a few days after the referendum and in contradiction of the majority 'No' vote, Tsipras consented to a new bailout agreement, continuing the austerity policies and forgetting his unrealistic and irrational promises to the people. In September of the same year the party called early elections, which it won with 35.46% of the vote.

If that was not enough of a paradox, Syriza twice formed a government in 2015 with the Independent Greeks, an ultra-conservative, nationalist party with strong views about illegal migration, Greece's relationship with Turkey and the role of the Greek Orthodox Church.

### ODD SIMILARITIES

Although these various populist parties reflect distinct national problems and political or historical backgrounds, they also have many similarities. The major one is their rhetoric. Populists tend to oversimplify complex issues, leading to the distortion of a modern political Manichaeism (e.g. the winners of globalisation vs. the losers, the good citizens vs. the bad elites). They offer the public unrealistic, magic solutions to important problems, based more on sentiment than rationale. Catchy slogans replace solid political arguments and proposals.

Despite their differing ideological traits, populist parties all challenge the status quo, basing their arguments on actual systemic inefficiencies. They promote themselves as the voice of public discontent by exploiting the anxieties and fears of the electorate.<sup>104</sup> To embed their anti-establishment character, populists are always highly Eurosceptic, presenting the EU as a threat to traditional values and national interests.

Populist parties have similar communication strategies, consisting of noise-producing and attention-seeking tactics. They prevail in the social media arena, which often performs like a populism laboratory. Comparative research has shown that proportionally they have a bigger social media impact than mainstream traditional parties.<sup>105</sup> For example, in Germany, there

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103 Syriza, 'About Syriza', last updated June 2015.

104 S. van Kessel, *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9–14.

105 P. Kakolyris, 'Political Fragmentation and the Role of Social Media', paper presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the Department of Political Science and International Relations (University of Peloponnese), Loutraki, 11–13 December 2015.

are marginally more AfD followers on Facebook and Twitter than followers of the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands), even though the AfD has only a fraction of the Christian Democratic Union's electoral support. In Britain, there are marginally more UKIP followers on social media than followers of the Conservatives or the Labour Party, even though it only has one MP.

One of the reasons for this is the anti-system character of social media compared with the traditional mass media. But simplicity is the key factor that connects social media with populist views. In the 140 characters of a tweet it is impossible to analyse all the dimensions of a political problem, but there is space for the poster to give the audience a 'catchy title', an idea easy to understand within seconds. By their nature, social media formats are best suited to short answers, simple ideas and vivid images containing a lot of emotion. Populist parties are heavy producers of these political products.

### THE CHALLENGE OF EUROSCEPTIC AND NATIONALIST POPULISM

The electoral success of Euro-sceptic political parties challenges the pro-European political establishment. The first and most apparent consequence of this success is that nationalist-populist parties have managed to impose their agenda on the public debate. In order to avoid the loss of voters to their right, centre-right parties have tended to adapt their rhetoric to meet this agenda on a number of issues, including EU solidarity, security and migration policy. This may seem to be a natural reaction, but in reality it is self-defeating, not to mention that it validates the populist argumentation (no matter how poor the latter actually is).<sup>106</sup> Voters who are attracted by the nationalist-populist narrative are more likely to remain supporters of populist parties. However, there cannot be a common response to populism and nationalism, since not all European problems can be instantly solved. No single model can be applied across the different countries, political cultures, electoral bases and so on.

It has been suggested that in order to deal with the problem, all political parties that reject both nationalism and populism, and are pro-European, should try to form a sort of *cordon sanitaire*. The notion behind this idea is that if nationalist-populist political forces are isolated, they will gradually lose their influence on public opinion. However, experience has shown that the implementation of this tactic may only be partly successful as it may also result in making Euro-sceptics appear anti-systemic and thus actually boost their popularity. At the same time, using nationalist-populist parties as electoral or governmental partners could prove even more harmful in the long-run, as this legitimises their role in political affairs. Pro-European political parties seem to be trapped between the hammer and the anvil. For the centre-right parties it would be far more effective to stick to their principles and defend them, rather than adapting them for short-term electoral benefit. Even if this tactic does not pay off immediately, it is the only way to deal with nationalist populism without letting such parties become an ideologically dominant force.

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106 *The Economist*, 'Playing with Fear', 12 December 2015.

The real answer to the problem posed by the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties is to tackle the sources of the problems raised by populists. Centre–right parties should not try to win the wrong battle: it is not necessary to try to gain moral superiority; rather they should go into real battle with the challenges and problems that have actually fuelled populism. Without tangible results in the economy and without coherent EU policies and solidarity among member states on the issue of migration, Eurosceptics will most probably gain more ground in the near future. They will be able to present the EU as the source of every problem and themselves as the crusaders of change for the benefit of the least privileged. A rethink of the basic concept of European integration, with an emphasis on common European values (such as peace, development, cooperation, solidarity and prosperity for all) is the only viable alternative to Euroscepticism.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In this context, centre–right parties should explore ways to:

- deal with the issues raised by the populist parties rather than tackling populism as a political opponent;
- remember the consequences of nationalism in Europe not as an old-fashioned school lesson, but as a possible new reality;
- speak a simpler—but not simplistic—language;
- limit the influence of populists in the social media arena, where they usually prevail and are able to broaden their political/electoral audience;
- use new technologies and political innovation to instigate active citizenship and political/electoral participation;
- open up models of internal organisation to reach new electoral audiences; and
- have an active and visible presence in local communities to make people more interested in the mainstream by forging stronger links to local groups.

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