



International Conference

# The rise of anti-EU parties and the upcoming European elections

6 May 2014

Jean Monnet Building, Luxembourg

## Introduction

In association with the Representation of the European Commission in Luxembourg, the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies convened a one-day conference on “The rise of anti-EU parties and the upcoming European elections” on 6 May 2014 in Luxembourg. About 25 participants from a wide range of EU member-states debated four topics:

- (1) the phenomenon of the seemingly irresistible rise of anti-EU parties and movements
- (2) the causes of this rise
- (3) the impact on the EU political landscape
- (4) the perspectives and possible responses

## 1. The phenomenon

### *(a) anti-EU, populism, radical right?*

At a descriptive level, there is a vast array of anti-EU parties – from right autonomists (True Finns, UKIP) via the extreme right (FN, FPÖ in Austria, Vlams Belang, Wilders’ party in the Netherlands or the Swiss UDC) to left radicals (Syriza and Movement 5 Stars). An alternative typology is as follows: (i) nationalist, e.g. Berlusconi’s Forza Italia; (ii) anti-establishment parties, e.g. UKIP; (iii) neo-Fascist: Jobbik and Golden Dawn (not primarily anti-EU).

According to a number of participants, there is considerable conceptual confusion when using terms such as ‘anti-EU’, ‘populist parties’ or the radical right. The main reason is that these notions describe very different phenomena that are only partially linked by attitudes to the EU. For example, popular euro-scepticism and party euro-scepticism are not synonymous. Indeed, parties that (claim to) defend national interest tend to differ significantly from parties that are against the euro, the EU and the European project as a whole (e.g. Austria, Germany, Italy). Linked to this is the danger of conflating parties and public opinion, e.g. PPV in the Netherlands is very anti-EU but not so much its voters, whereas for the Dutch socialists it is the opposite.

### *(b) aims and objectives: coherent or contradictory?*

The aim of many anti-EU parties and movements is twofold: first, to challenge the liberal consensus at the heart of national and EU politics and, in the case of rightwing forces, to disrupt the alliance between conservatives and liberals within the wider centre-right family; second, to offer and consolidate a new political positioning.

A number of participants highlighted the tensions and contradictions that characterise anti-EU parties. First, an anti-establishment rhetoric vs. an establishment identity (Le Pen dynasty,

Nigel Farage who used to work as a trader in the City of London); second, anti-EU but in favour of free trade and globalisation (e.g. UKIP); third, a commitment to normalisation vs. new forms of extremism (e.g. FN has replaced anti-Semitism with Islamophobia)

*(c) transitory or permanent phenomenon?*

There was widespread agreement among the participants that the rise of anti-EU parties is not simply an ephemeral, rightwing backlash against the leftwing establishment but a much more complex phenomenon that is here to stay in most, if not all, EU countries. Anti-EU parties have emerged in most of the 28 member-states and are now established forces, with some expected to reach 25-30% in the forthcoming European elections (Front National in France, UKIP in GB).

*(d) electoral appeal?*

Many anti-EU parties are not exclusively left- or rightwing but seek to target a broad section of the national electorate, including disaffected working-class and lower middle-class voters as well as those who object to tax-and-spend and welfarism.

However, it was also stressed that these anti-EU forces have no natural constituency and that their actual electoral support is weak. For example, among registered voters the support is consistently and considerably less than 10%. It is the low voter turnout at elections (especially elections to the European Parliament) that explains why these parties get between 15% and 30%. This is worrying but by no means a landslide.

Moreover, euro-scepticism is not just the radical right and even the radical right is deeply divided. On the whole, indifference, abstention and apathy are on the rise, not simply anti-EU sentiments. Crucially, it's not so much a matter of voters being indifferent and staying at home than a deep and growing distrust (*méfiance*) vis-à-vis politics and political change.

## **2. The causes**

*(a) weakness and vacuum within the EU system*

According to some participants, the pro-EU forces across the Union are weak and in political disarray. They have retreated into a cosy safe haven, creating a fertile soil for nationalism and xenophobia. There is also the self-delusion of enlightened European citizen (*homo europaeus*, rational, cosmopolitan), which lacks any basis in reality or merely applies to ruling elites.

It was also argued that the failure of the EU and its member-states to address the legitimacy deficit leads to widespread frustration that breeds disaffection and disillusionment. In turn, this favours charismatic leaders at the national level who make EU officials look even less legitimate. Crucially, the twin phenomena of technocracy and populism arguably reinforce each other in a vicious circle that fuels the current dynamics and is tearing the post-1945 settlement asunder.

*(b) national politics*

Other participants contended that the emergence of anti-EU parties is to a large extent a national matter. In the case of UKIP, euro-scepticism translates into indifference vis-à-vis the EU. Farage's party will gain seats in the forthcoming EP elections but it hardly stands any

chance to get Westminster seats in 2015. The real danger is co-opting UKIP positions (on taxation, welfare and immigration). Britain has moved away from a country with a working class to a 'soft' middle class country. The rise of English nationalism is in large part the result of growing inequality and Scotland's looming independence.

Other participants confirmed that in a country such as Switzerland which has some of the strongest anti-EU sentiments, it's not so much about the EU as about national issues, especially how to deal with immigration and identity. The anti-EU forces are fighting immigration, economic insecurity and welfare tourism, using ideas that rest on xenophobia, exclusion and nationalism.

At the same time, immigration itself is not the core problem but rather the lack of jobs, housing, social security, etc. All this is a failure of the mainstream parties, as evinced by Le Pen's accession to the 2<sup>nd</sup> round in 2002, which was not surprising. Back then, fewer than 30% of registered voters backed traditional parties (in the first round, Chirac got less than 13% of registered voters). In short, many anti-EU parties are a dangerous diversion to distract from the failure of established parties.

#### *(c) media attention and imitation by other parties*

For many years, anti-EU parties and movements have benefitted from a media frenzy that has given them more attention and prime-time TV space than even the political mainstream. At the same time, there has been a distinct lack of proper scrutiny (e.g. about the tensions and contradictions that characterise anti-EU forces).

Moreover, established political parties are borrowing from anti-EU parties – whether in terms of rhetoric (e.g. the UMP under Sarkozy) or in terms of policy (the Tory promise for an in/out referendum that has been demanded by UKIP) or indeed both at once. Connected with this is the backlash against the established parties and powers ('clean hands' because many anti-EU forces have not been in power, but there are notable exceptions such as FPÖ in Austria). Anti-EU parties have also become more professional and better organised, often with new and more effective leaders who are taking advantage of a general malaise.

### **3. The impact**

#### *(a) alienation from mainstream politics*

What is the general political import of contemporary anti-EU populism? The main impact is alienation from mainstream politics for decades. In the case of the UK, only John Major won 51% of the popular vote in 1992. Since then there has been a quite dramatic collapse in electoral participation.

Linked to this is the gradual rise of social and cultural alienation due to inequality, not only income but also environmental inequality. Compare central Glasgow to the borough of Chelsea and Kensington in London: life expectancy is barely 50 in the former and close to 80 in the latter.

#### *(b) democracy*

Some participants argued that the rise of anti-EU parties has galvanised public discussion and political debate, including about controversial issues such as immigration, which is both an

indication of vibrant democracies and a sign that the mainstream parties are addressing the challenge.

Other participants were less optimistic, saying that some parallels with the 1930s are striking. While there are many differences, the parallels include apathy, indifference and absence of moral anchors, e.g. Rowan Williams' point about Britain being a post-Christian country marks an abdication of responsibility.

Bound up with this is a profound pessimism that has pervaded the populace: Britain is a middle-class country, run by and for the middle class, but unlike the post-1945 period today there is no faith in the future. On the contrary, there is real and growing fear about being worse off. It seems as if democracy has copped out of providing a modicum of moral certainty; the political class is not offering moral leadership. Nor is it riding on "the wave of the future".

Moreover, the rise of populism merely masks a post-ideological age, as there are no attempts by political parties to outline a philosophy of history. That, in turn, generates anxiety, which is fundamentally different from fear. Are mainstream politicians prepared to confront anxiety? In Britain, political parties are only just beginning to admit that immigration is a problem

#### **4. Perspectives and responses**

##### *(a) at the EU level*

Most participants agreed that it would be wrong to proceed with the current strategies and push ahead with the European project, pretending that it is 'business as usual'. Across the Union people do not identify with the European Parliament. The four leading candidates do not resonate with the citizenry and voters.

One option is to renationalise certain powers to national parliaments where voter turnout is much higher. Another is to reform the free movement of people and access to welfare, promoted by the Commission, which undermines support for the EU at the national level.

##### *(b) at the member-state level*

For many participants, it is the crisis of democracy that is the key issue, not merely institutional reform. So far the main response to anti-EU populism has been either a *cordon sanitaire* or borrowing their rhetoric (and even their policies). The latter has legitimated their ideas, whereas the former has failed even more conspicuously because the demonisation, the stigmatisation and the ostracisation of anti-EU parties are counterproductive.

What is needed is a proper hegemonic re-alignment and case for democracy and Europe. Linked to this is real scrutiny and alternative ideas on controversial issues such as immigration, welfare, identity and inequality.

However, any revival of democracy would have to be sweeping. As such, it exceeds the capacities of the EU. Bigger countries can cope with this challenge perhaps better than smaller member-states. Moreover, trust in national institutions is always going to be greater.

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