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Societies outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



European Economic and Social Committee



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Study on Societies outside Metropolises

The role of civil society organisations in facing populism Executive Summary

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Foreword by Arno Metzler



Populism in the EU is currently at its highest levels since the 1930s. The average populist vote in EU Member States now stands at 24%, up from 8.5% in the year 2000. Hence, we must all ask ourselves at which point in the last two decades did mainstream politics fall out of favour with our citizens? What has caused the proliferation of populism and Euroscepticism? What role can civil society play in limiting its propagation? These are fundamental questions that must be asked and answered, if we, civil society are to help the public to become aware of the extent to which populist approaches can endanger our democratic values.

In this context, it is with great pleasure that I commend to you the study '*Societies Outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism*', which was commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), at the request of the Diversity Europe Group, the Group which represents civil society organisations. It is precisely because our Members represent such a wide spectrum of socio-professional sectors that we consider it our duty to use these networks and to raise awareness among citizens of the dangers of populism. Our value added lies in our access to local, regional and national civil society and citizen groups and we must put this value added at the service of 'Europe'.

What is interesting about this study is that it makes comparisons *among* regions in the *same* countries, one less and one more advantaged region. I am certain that we could project most of the conclusions to other EU Member States.

It will become evident to the reader that economic decline, social instability and limited levels of education are significant factors in explaining the increased support for populists throughout the EU. However, there are other interdependent and more important factors, such as the desire to preserve the status quo, to protect traditional values, monocultures or particular identities. What is commonly referred to as 'identity politics'. Opposing 'us' against the elites and 'others'. Picking the right 'enemies' of course is key!

In parallel, real or perceived insecurities are fuelled daily by disinformation, whilst many young voters are attracted to the idea that populist parties can bring *positive change* to stagnant and incompetent political systems. Unfortunately, once present, populism evolves and feeds on multiple forms of voter discontent. Personally I believe that there is one common reason which unites citizens who are attracted to populism. Namely: the fury of not been listened to and of not being *heard* by national and/or European Institutions. The feeling that governments and 'Europe' care only for minority groups and not for them, the average European.

The sense that there is no shared European identity which expresses them.

I believe that the only way to strike out against populism is through our same democratic system that populists are trying to undermine. Listening and engaging in dialogue, rather than speaking at citizens. Ensuring that national and European policies are more responsive to proposals by citizens and civil society. Putting our energy towards communicating and explaining the EU's achievements and the positive impact on citizen's daily life. Trying to convince localities and regions to develop a common European purpose and explaining that their diversity is welcome. In all of this frenzy of activities, civil society must play a key role against the proliferation of populism. However, this will necessitate national and EU assistance to enhance their current *capacity* to act. We as Members of the EESC have a *double* responsibility. To step up our activities at *both* the national and European levels, to strengthen networks, to better explain and to bring 'Europe' to its citizens. Ultimately, protecting and preserving liberal democracy is everyone's business!



Arno Metzler

President of the Diversity Europe Group

Objectives and Methodology

The Study had a twofold objective: to provide a better understanding of the factors influencing citizens' choices in favour of populism in non-metropolitan areas and insight into how civil society organisations (CSOs) operate to counter populism in view of recommending further civic actions.

Reflecting this goal, eight non-metropolitan areas in four EU Member States – Austria, France, Italy and Poland – were selected to carry out the research: Klagenfurt-Villach and Niederösterreich-Süd (Austria), Drôme and Aisne (France), Udine and Reggio di Calabria (Italy), and Płocki and Nowosądecki (Poland). The identification of the regions was based on socioeconomic criteria, with one region per country on/or higher than the EU average and one below the EU average and a high populist vote in all of them.

The point of departure of the study is the definition of the influential scholar of populism Cas Mudde, in which populism is defined as *“a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people”*.

The dual goal of the study has been operationalised through two sets of research questions. The first one pertains to the reasons behind the populist vote and, more concretely, the determinants of populism in non-metropolitan areas. That is, the factors that affect populist voting (socioeconomic, social, political, discursive, e.g. political rhetoric and online disinformation), the extent to which these factors are present in non-metropolitan regions in the focal countries and whether they explain populist voting.

The second set of questions address the situation of CSOs in the regions with regard to the populist challenge and their role regarding populism in non-metropolitan areas by asking if CSOs have specific programmes or actions targeted at tackling populism in the focal regions, identifying the strategies CSOs employ to combat populism and, ultimately, exploring the ways in which CSOs can increase their effectiveness in tackling populism.

The responsibility of mainstream parties and the role of political rhetoric, Euroscepticism, online disinformation and calls for more direct democracy were given special attention as elements of the populist challenge.

A number of complementary research methods were employed to find answers to the main research questions:

- Through intensive desk research, relevant sources of information were identified and analysed, such as existing studies of populism and related phenomena, social and economic data (national statistics and Eurostat), public opinion polls (national, international and Eurobarometer), election results and analysis (national and international sources) and CSO databases (national sources).
- Two statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between socioeconomic indicators and populist voting patterns, based on existing social and economic data and election information. The first made use of the voting patterns observed in the eight regions themselves, using indicators at NUTS 3 level where possible and NUTS 2 level when the former were not available; the second looked at national level indicators and their relationship to overall national voting patterns.
- Exploratory citizen surveys solicited the opinions of citizens in the eight focus regions in the period July-December 2018. 616 citizens shared their political, cultural and social concerns and outlined the issues that inform their choices as voters, e.g. with a focus on populist parties, political choices and likely factors for these choices.
- Three focus groups aiming at eliciting in-depth information and opinions from stakeholders, including CSO activists, were carried out in three regions – Klagenfurt-Villach and Niederösterreich-Süd in Austria and Drôme in France.
- 54 experts and CSOs were interviewed in the four countries and regions in question, including European level experts and activists in the field. The in-depth interviews further illuminated the populist phenomena from diverse perspectives – regional, national and European – identified commonalities and differences, and set out recommendations that encompass the various aspects of the complex populist challenge.

Main Findings

Socioeconomic and cultural factors of populism

Depending on the case, some factors are stronger than others and take precedence in driving populism, but rather an interplay of factors, which feed on and reinforce each other. For example, the rejection of migration can be due to cultural factors, but also to fear of job losses or job competition.

"Anxieties" and "fears" were often invoked by those interviewed to explain the rise of populism as populists employ a manipulation of popular fears as their main tactic. For example, "cultural insecurity" as an explanation for why the rise of populist political forces also exists in countries where the economic situation is quite good. Even in cases in which the socioeconomic factors were considered strong, their influence was thought to be indirect and due to economic and financial insecurity.

Factors for populism may vary across different social groups, such as with middle-income groups, where the fear of loss of status is the strongest factor, while in lower income groups it is the more direct fear of loss of jobs and income.

There are differences between the countries as well as between the different regions within the same country.

Populism in the countries and the regions

Austria

Cultural factors are a stronger driver of populism than socioeconomic ones, but both sets of factors are important and reinforce each other as socioeconomic anxiety reinforces the cultural aspects. There are no populist far left parties in the country. The three main topics exploited by the far-right are immigration, national identity and “welfare chauvinism”.

Regional specifics in Austria

The influence of both sets of factors is generally uniform across the country with **no substantial regional differences**. However, a rural-urban divide, geographic proximity and the role of neighbouring countries are influential. Above all else, there is a **city-countryside divide that plays a role**.

France

Cultural factors are stronger in driving populism than socioeconomic factors, although both sets of factors are closely linked. Socioeconomic factors do not cause populism directly, but lead to fears about job security, income and life prospects. **Abandonment by the state**, loss of control and the perceived **distance between political elites and the people** contribute to populism.

Regional specifics in France

There are regional differences in the impact of the different factors and, especially, the divergence between the **centre and the peripheral** parts of the country. For Aisne, in the north, this was job losses linked to deindustrialisation as a result of globalisation, while in Drôme it was job insecurity, fear of poverty and potential competition for jobs with migrants.

Italy

There is a combination of **socioeconomic and cultural factors that drive populism**, but with an emphasis on the socioeconomic factors. It is a case of interplay between the different factors, where socioeconomic factors create financial and job uncertainty, which is then blamed on factors such as migration, perceived strict EU rules and other issues exploited by populists.

Regional specifics in Italy

There are **differences between the North and the South** in the drivers behind populism, political choices and different “types of populism”. In the North, the main factor is anxiety about losing safety, security, income and living standards, while in the South it is about social benefits and increasing incomes. Those voting for populists in the North feel underrepresented by the central government, those in the South abandoned by it.

Poland

The most important **drivers of populism in Poland** are cultural factors, taking precedence over socioeconomic factors. These are cultural anxieties and can be grouped in several sets, including multiculturalism, secularisation and gender equality, with an additional focus on LGBTQI+ rights, the perceived threat from foreign powers, and fear of refugees and Islam.

Regional specifics in Poland

There are **different factors at play in the different regions**, stemming from historical developments, with the Eastern and Southern part voting for the populist ruling party PiS and the North-West for the non-populist opposition. Differences between bigger cities and smaller towns, the Church, national values and history, and opposition to the EU and globalisation play a role.

Additional factors of populism: crises of representative democracy, strengths and weaknesses of populist parties, responsibilities of traditional parties, calls for direct democracy, online disinformation and Euroscepticism

The very **crisis of representative democracy** and populism were identified as a long-term danger for liberal democracy, as populists play by the rules to win elections but then seek to change the rules to their advantage. This is related to the issue of diminished trust in mainstream parties whose standing was badly damaged from years of only them being in power and the approximation of party positions, leading to them being indistinguishable to voters. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that mainstream parties have either given up without challenging populists or decided to mimic their tactics.

With regard to the **strengths and weaknesses of populist parties**, their main strength is “communications”, but only in terms of instrumentally using fears and polarizing society. In a sense, they sometimes raise the right questions but provide the wrong answers. However, communication is also a weakness for populists as their abrasive style and language can be considered repulsive and polarizing. Their main weakness is that they do not have actual solutions or viable plans for policies beyond their shallow rhetoric.

Traditional, mainstream parties are also considered to have a **responsibility** for the rise of populism and the populist radical right as they have failed to actually address the most pressing societal issues and shied away from taking a stand against populists.

The study clearly identified a demand for more **direct democracy** on behalf of citizens, possibly as a response to the crisis of representative democracy. The experts and CSO activists, however, were nearly unanimous in their criticism of direct democracy in its current forms, saying that it could create more problems than solutions. Possible solutions can be found in deliberative mechanisms and carefully prepared referenda with informed debate, especially at local level.

The role of **online disinformation** was considered closely related to populism, and clearly contributing to its rise – populists make use of the advantages of social and online media to spread their messages and, on the back of a crisis of traditional media, this is a very successful move. The quick cycle of news, polarisation and encapsulation through echo chambers works to their advantage.

Eurocepticism is another related aspect, as populists have a strong relation to it. The close links between Eurocepticism and populism are due, at least, to two reasons.

First, populists find the EU a convenient enemy that they can blame with impunity – not least because they command multiple communication channels and the predominant opinion is that the EU has a poor communication strategy.

Secondly, at a deeper level, the EU represents things that the populists stand against as it is an example of everyday practice in liberal democracy and transnational cooperation. The EU is seen as a bulwark against populism, such as in Poland where EU membership enjoys high support despite a generally Euroceptic, populist government.

The role of civil society organisations in tackling the populist challenge

Citizens and CSOs do not clearly understand the term “**populism**” and it **is not recognised as a distinctive type of challenge**. CSOs providing social services on behalf of the state/municipalities are well represented in the regions. There are some examples of civic initiatives in support of migrants, and efforts to tackle online disinformation and support direct democracy, such as participatory budgeting. Euroscepticism is, by and large, not addressed, with the exception of Poland.

The mapping of CSOs active in the areas of promoting EU values, civic education and engagement, civil liberties, direct democracy, support to minorities, refugees and migrants and tackling online disinformation, which was conducted in

the regions based on official information sources specifically for the study, reveals a **marginal number of CSOs implementing activities that can potentially tackle populism**. The lowest percentage is in France (0.12% in Drôme of all registered CSOs in the region). The findings of the field research confirms **the lack of encompassing and comprehensive civil society initiatives in tackling populism** due to a variety of reasons: the complexity of the phenomenon, which needs further understanding, the shrinking civic space, which includes a lack of an enabling environment in which CSOs can operate, limited human resources (many of the organisations are almost entirely reliant on volunteers), reduced funding and lack of expertise.

The **need for civil society to be supported** in non-metropolitan regions in terms of resources, knowledge, expertise and knowhow has been identified as a prerequisite in order to empower it to have capacity to:

- raise **awareness of the specificities of the populist phenomenon in the regions and devise effective strategies to address its roots and manifestations**;
- give voice to and **advocate for those who are underrepresented or in an underprivileged position**;
- lead the **development of a public sphere for debate at local level**;
- foster the **development of cooperation and networks both across regions and countries and at different levels** (local, national, European) and among different stakeholders;
- monitor and challenge the **policy solutions proposed by populists**;
- support the elaboration of **policy solutions to citizens’ problems and concerns** that have not, to date, been addressed by mainstream politicians and are exploited by populists;
- implement **initiatives related to informal civic education and active citizenship**;
- tackle **online disinformation**;
- **promote European values** and the essential ingredients of a healthy democracy;

10 Recommendations to CSOs and other Stakeholders

1	<p>Develop a knowledge base on "populism" to inform a tailored approach to tackling its roots and manifestations</p> <p>→ Concrete actions: research, analysis, training, public awareness</p>
2	<p>Foster EU communication and engagement</p> <p>→ Concrete actions: awareness raising campaign, local debates and informational activities</p>
3	<p>Restore the public sphere of dialogue and discussion → Concrete actions: create an infrastructure for debate, discussion and engagement</p>
4	<p>Complement representative democracy with collaborative elements of participatory democracy → Concrete actions: crowdsourcing citizens' ideas for policy solutions, participatory budgeting, etc.</p>
5	<p>Strengthen the EU's role and actions as guardians of EU values and democracy in the EU and in Member States → Concrete actions: debates and resolutions, infringement procedures, etc.</p>
6	<p>Provoke traditional parties to innovate and seek new solutions to citizens' concerns exploited by populists → Concrete actions: debates and engagement activities to identify actual citizens' needs and concerns. Brainstorming with different stakeholders and soliciting the "wisdom of the crowd" of possible policy solutions</p>
7	<p>Support civil society at local level → Concrete actions: ensure independent funding from populists governments and provide training and knowledge on "populism", online disinformation, communication and advocacy skills</p>
8	<p>Tackle online disinformation at all levels → Concrete actions: elaborate a consistent multilevel strategy and an action plan ; training on fact checking and media literacy, work on civic education</p>
9	<p>Invest in formal and informal civic education → Concrete actions: develop and implement civic education curricula in schools as part of the formal education process and support informal civic education in communities through CSOs and other stakeholders</p>
10	<p>Boost internationalisation / Europeanisation through exchanges – horizontal, vertical and multi-stakeholder involving non-metropolitan areas → Concrete actions: exchange schemes, networking and collaboration between different regions with similar problems across borders and between different levels and different stakeholders</p>



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