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# STATE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE 2020

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STATE OF **POPULISM**  
IN EUROPE **2020**

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# Populism in Europe 2020 – Ending half a decade

If we had to name a single concept from the last decade that has spilled over from political science jargon into public discourse, spreading through the latter like wildfire, then populism would most likely be the word to spring to everyone's mind. In political science, populism has been a major topic for decades now, and over time it has occasionally also cropped up in public discourse – often erroneously used to refer to demagogic. But during the past decade, it has emerged as the top issue for those who are interested in politics. Over this ten-year period, some 55,000 academic articles have been published on the issue. The newspaper articles, blog and social media posts on it number in the millions.<sup>1</sup> And even as all this attention has been focusing on populism – or maybe because of the increased attention –, the various discourses still feature numerous competing definitions for the term. Indeed, some scholars even posit that categorising certain parties and politicians as populists is just wrong methodologically; they would rather focus on the political breakthrough of illiberalism, nationalism, the far-right or political radicalism in general. No matter one's view of the concept of populism, however, what is undeniable is that new kind of parties have emerged in politics, and many of them have started to win elections or have established themselves as major political forces in their respective political systems. Their rise owes in part to the foregoing economic crisis, while at the same time they also thrive by casting themselves as counterpoints to the established political consensus of liberal and multicultural democracies.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Google Scholar

The alternation in government of centre-left and centre-right political forces that had dominated the post-World War II era disappeared and has been replaced by a tripartite or even more fragmented political scene, with all the concomitant unpredictability and tensions. The traditional parties of the centre-right and the centre-left have experienced unprecedented declines in their levels of support, while alternative political formations – not only populists but also greens and liberals – are drawing a growing number of their former voters. In many countries, charismatic leaders have become more popular than technocratic parties; the politics of confrontation have become more appealing than the politics of cooperation; emotions have become more important than facts; the respect of the elite have been replaced by anti-elitism; closing borders have become more popular than to open our societies up to the world outside.

There are a number of reasons to explain why the political systems changed in such a dramatic manner. It is not only impossible to pinpoint a single variable that led to these changes, but even listing all of the trends that have contributed to the rising tide of populism would take too long here. The main trends that definitely deserve to be mentioned, however, are the global economic crisis after 2008; the growing uncertainty in the labour market; the runaway pace of the changes in technology, society, the economy and in societal values; the dissolution of traditional communities and the growing levels of migration; the deconstruction of the social safety net; and the increasing convergence in the policies advocated by the centre-left and the centre-right. At the same time, voters realised that the era of

grand economic visions has come to an end, and globalisation, market economy and multinational corporations are apparently gobbling up everything. As a result, the political fault lines are increasingly less likely to be organised around economic policies, and they are more likely to centre on social or cultural concerns. In other words, people and public discourse do not tend to be mainly divided along the lines of their respective ideas about the future of the economy but based on what they think about social values, lifestyles, migration, the nation and supranational entities, such as multinational corporations or the European Union.

These changes do not imply, of course, that the dilemmas that previously defined politics are gone for good, that old political parties have been rendered completely obsolete. In fact, some countries have not changed at all in this respect over the past decade. All we claim here is that, to varying degrees in each country, the trends mentioned above have manifested themselves and now decisively shape politics – jointly with the earlier trends.

When the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) launched the Populism Tracker project jointly with the Budapest-based Policy Solutions in 2015, they set out to gauge the impact of these changing trends, to present their insights about this phenomenon to the wider public, and to propose progressive answers instead of populist politics. We were among the first to systematically track the popularity of over 70 populist parties in the European Union because we believe that we should draw on data rather than the impressions generated by media bubbles to obtain a realistic picture of how dangerous the spread of populism has become on the continent. We have been looking at public opinion polls in 28 (and now 27) EU Member States each month since 2015, observing the appearance of new populist parties and the disappearance of previous ones, the rise to governmental responsibility of some and the fall or, alternatively, the re-election of others. Each quarter we published a summary in which we reviewed how populist parties stood among likely voters, and we also published annual reviews in which we discussed the developments of the past year in the European populist scene and the changes therein. We are proud that our findings were quoted in *The Economist* and *The Guardian*, among others. The book you hold in your hands now is the fifth in this series.

Just as in the case with the previous volumes in this series, our goal is not merely to present figures and political events but also to highlight the emerging trends and to help prepare our readers for the

changes on the horizon. Over the past five years, we have highlighted numerous such developments. Allow us to emphasise five important trends and insights from these five years:

Back in 2015, we saw both left-wing populist parties – that is parties which are opposed to multinational corporations and are critical of globalisation and capitalism – as well as right-wing populists – that is xenophobic, anti-EU and nationalist parties – increase their respective levels of public support. But while the latter were surging only in Western and Central and Eastern Europe, the former were almost exclusively limited to Southern Europe. These days, this once conspicuous regional fault line has vanished, and in all but a few countries left-wing populism has declined massively, and so they are anywhere near a position of winning elections. Right-wing populists, by contrast, have increased their support even in countries where such formations did not even exist a year or two ago, and they have ascended to government either on their own or as part of coalition governments in numerous countries of the EU. We can conclude, therefore, that all sorts of previous constraints that once served to put a ceiling on the popularity of right-wing populists have recently crumbled. This shift has turned them into potentially major players almost everywhere in the European Union, while left-wing populists are no longer serious contenders for governmental power almost anywhere, save for two-three Southern European Member States and Ireland.

We often run into difficulties when trying to categorise populist parties as either left-wing or right-wing. Not only because there are parties that cannot be classified based on the traditional political cleavages but also because some distinctly right-wing populist parties – thus, for example, the PiS in Poland and the Sweden Democrats – advocate robust welfare programmes. Although the welfare components of their platforms are often limited to the "native" population (read: non-immigrants), they are often deemed attractive by many former left-wing voters.

Another insight about the period we reviewed is that all those who had claimed that populists would not be able to govern and would soon fail once they took control of government have been proven wrong. Populists may often pursue harmful and dangerous policies, but generally speaking – and especially when they govern without a coalition partner – they tend to remain popular in government and tend to be re-elected, too. It is also apparent, however, that when they form a coalition with a centrist party that often proves to be a lethal

embrace for the populists: In countries where the government is comprised of a centre-left or centre-right party on the one hand, and a populist on the other, this constellation has often resulted in a major setback in terms of popularity for the populist party in the coalition.

Another key insight of the past five years is that while in the established democracies of Western Europe populists by and large adhere to the ground rules of democratic competition – that is once they are in power they are not able to transform the democratic institutional structure – in Central and Eastern Europe they tend to remake the entire democratic institutional structure in their own preferred image. In effect, this means that in Western, Southern and Northern Europe populists are players much like the other parties – sometimes they win, sometimes they lose, but either way, life goes on; in Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, they strive to eliminate or substantially weaken political pluralism. The fundamental relationship to liberal democracy is thus a key dividing line between the populists of the various regions in the EU.

The Brexit shock and the continuous improvement of European economic and employment data are both making the situation of anti-EU populists more difficult. One of the most favourable turns of

events in the past five years has been a growing restraint in the anti-EU rhetoric of populists almost everywhere – the United Kingdom is the exception – and the EU is more popular now with the European public than it has been in a long time. The struggle between pro-Europeans and anti-EU forces has been decisively won by the former.

2020 marks the end of an era. After five years of continuous tracking, this is the last joint FEPS-Policy Solutions volume on populism. We continue to believe what we wrote at the beginning of our joint research project: "Learning about populist parties will help us in better understanding them, and ultimately also in defending values such as liberal democracy, solidarity and deeper European integration." The numerous volumes we published on this topic – including our handbook entitled *Progressive Answers to Populism* – have sought to promote the underlying values. We trust that our work has been useful and interesting to all of our readers.

## Methodology

Some of the recurring and controversial questions that feature in research related to populism ask which parties and politicians can be called populists, how precise and/or important this concept really is, and whether populist parties pose a threat to democracy. The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Policy Solutions classify parties as populist on the basis of several criteria and we use the word descriptively rather than in an evaluative or negative sense.

We primarily examined whether a given party's programme, the rhetoric of its leading politicians and its official campaign messages cohere with Cas Mudde's well-known definition, which argues that populism is a thin-centred 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 party programmes, leadership rhetoric and campaign slogans are then assessed in terms of their tendency to build animosity in society; the use of the "us versus them" dichotomy; the rejection of social and political pluralism; and whether they express preference for direct democracy to a representative system.

If a party met all or several of these criteria and their popularity was sufficiently significant in the polls, we included it in our list of populist parties.

In compiling this list, we also took into consideration categorizations in the relevant academic literature – that is to say, designations by leading political analysts and researchers. Naturally, populist politicians often supplement their messages with other ideologies and values, such as nativism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, illiberalism, socialism or communism. We have attempted to categorize individual parties as either left-wing or right-wing populists.

We are, of course, aware that choosing to label a party as populist or to deliberately omit one of these parties from this study could be controversial. Nonetheless, we hope that the categorization we came up with based on our methodology will mesh with the assessments of the readers.

## About Populism Tracker

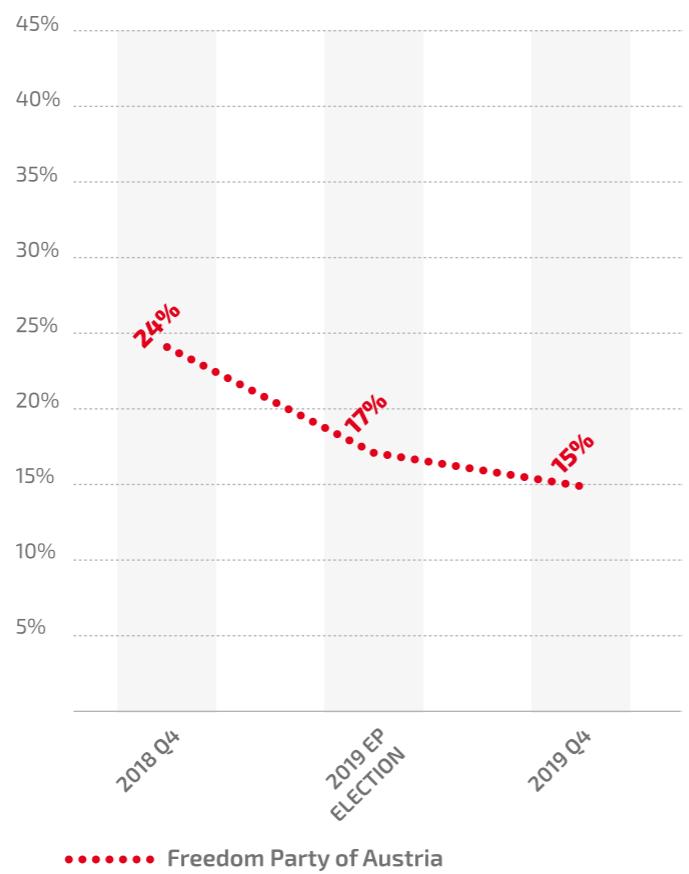
The Populism Tracker of The Progressive Post is a comprehensive website investigating populist trends in all the countries of the European Union (EU). The website is operated by FEPS and Policy Solutions. The Populism Tracker allows readers to continuously monitor the popularity of all European populist parties by using its Populism Map. It allows for the analysis of trends with the help of a continuously updated Populism Graph, and the website also offers studies, research and analyses published by Policy Solutions, FEPS and their partners on the subject of populism. Link: [www.progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker](http://www.progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker)



# Austria

2019 was not a good year for Austria's right-wing populist party, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). This is somewhat ironic given the overall strong position of right-wing populism in many European countries at this time and the FPÖ's status as a European pioneer of sorts as a successful right-wing populist party, as it was one of the first to draw mass support and the first to enter a government.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN AUSTRIA



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	ID	24%	15%

The defining political issue in Austria in 2019 was the so-called Ibiza affair involving the long-time FPÖ leader and Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and his deputy, Johann Gudenus. In a covertly recorded video on the Spanish island of Ibiza, Strache and Gudenus are seen promising their conversation partner, an actress posing as the niece of a Russian oligarch, public procurement commissions in exchange for party funding and taking control of Austria's leading tabloid, *Kronenzeitung* and turning it into a pro-FPÖ outlet.<sup>1</sup>

The eruption of the scandal resulted in Strache's resignation, which escalated relatively quickly with the firing of another controversial FPÖ politician, Herbert Kickl, from his position as the minister of interior.<sup>2</sup> This in turn led to the breakdown of the coalition between the FPÖ and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). After a few months during which Austria was ruled by an interim expert government because no new majority coalition was attainable, the Ibiza Crisis culminated in an early election that saw a massive drop in the FPÖ's support.

<sup>1</sup> See here: <https://www.nzz.ch/international/strache-tritt-ab-und-was-wir ueber-ibiza-wissen-ld.1482831>

Before the scandal, the FPÖ (although it had gradually declined from its peak polling values of 33% in 2017 and even 37% in 2016) had been supported by a solid quarter of the Austrian electorate in the first months of 2019. Even before the crisis the FPÖ was already being squeezed in the polls due to the popularity of the centre-right chancellor Sebastian Kurz. And even though Kurz's personal appeal meant that the FPÖ had to give up on its aspiration to become the leading governmental party in Austria, it was still in a very strong electoral position, in close competition for the second place with the centre-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ).

But in the immediate aftermath of the Ibiza crisis, the FPÖ's support dropped substantially just before the EP election, in which it ended up with only 17.2% of the votes. Although the result was relatively close to its showing in the 2014 EP election (19.5%), that had been a relative low-point for the party as well. Even worse for the FPÖ, it lost almost 10 points in the early national election held in September 2019 in the aftermath of the governmental crisis that Strache's scandal had caused. The FPÖ dropped from 26.97% in 2017 to 16.17% in the most recent election in September 2019. Thereafter, it managed to more or less stabilise this level of support, ending 2019 with 15% in the polls.

And while there was some speculation that after Strache's departure from politics the rift between the centre-right ÖVP (which won the elections with 37.5% of the votes) and the FPÖ could be healed, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) finally chose to enter an alliance with the Greens instead, relegating the FPÖ to an opposition status again.

To put the FPÖ's crisis in perspective, in light of the seriousness of Strache's actions and the intense media coverage, a drop of roughly 10 points was not too dramatic. More importantly, despite the exposure of the party's long-time leader and charismatic figurehead as corrupt, the FPÖ continues to be supported by 15% of the voters. Strache betrayed not only the trust of his public mandate but also his own party community through the private use of party funds. Despite all these, a sizeable part of the Austrian public sees

no alternative but the FPÖ to represent it.<sup>3</sup> The FPÖ has essentially stabilised at the immediate post-scandal level and apparently the disturbing revelations since then have not served to further erode its electoral support. This suggests that at this point roughly one in every seven Austrian voters would vote for the right-wing populist party no matter what.

Despite the still relatively high level of social support for the FPÖ's ideas in Austrian society, the public perception of the party and their stint in government that ended with major scandals is quite negative, reflected by the loss of its coalition partner ÖVP and the general impression of being a difficult and often undisciplined governing partner. This perception in turn, has fuelled the substantial drop in the party's popularity. The latter is not in and of itself unusual for governing parties but in the case of the FPÖ the drop was more pronounced than usual, which seems to suggest that its own voters had expected more from the Freedom Party.

Thus, while the FPÖ continues to be a strong player in the Austrian party system and will likely continue to be seen as a potential coalition partner and kingmaker, especially for the centre-right ÖVP,<sup>4</sup> it appears no nearer to its goal of leading a government than it was two decades ago when the news of its participation in the government as a junior of the conservatives rocked the continent.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, such was the strength of Strache's personal popularity that despite the devastating evidence in the video he personally received so many preferential votes from voters in the EP election to give him a claim to a seat in the European Parliament, which he ultimately did not take up, however, despite an initial announcement that he might do so (See here: <https://www.diepresse.com/5635238/strache-hat-dank-vorzugsstimmen-anspruch-auf-eu-mandat>).

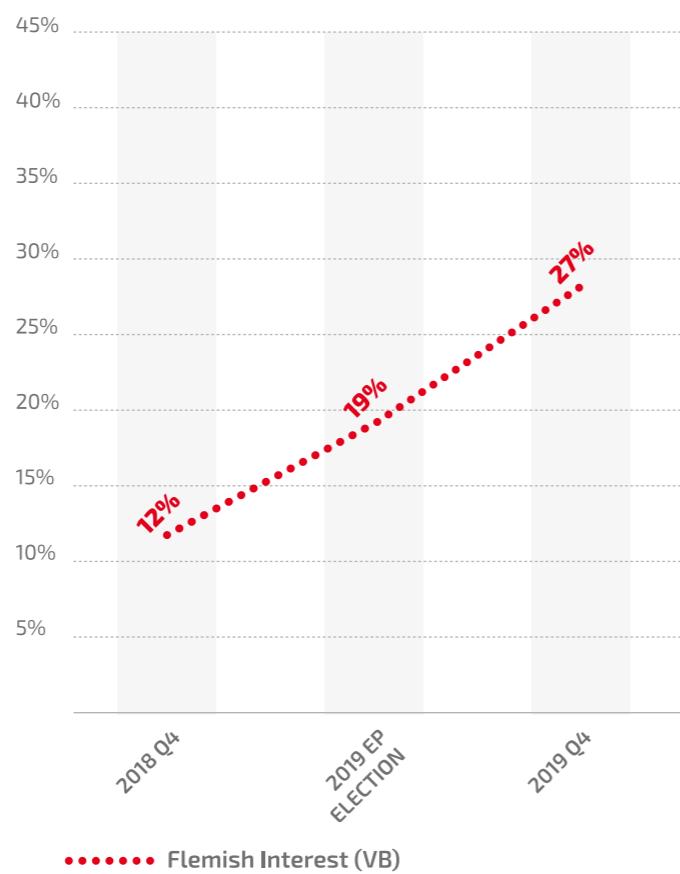
<sup>4</sup> But at the regional level occasionally also for the SPÖ. Such a coalition had been formed already in 2004, when FPÖ's long-time leader Jörg Haider was elected by the two parties as the state prime minister in Carinthia, as well as in 2015 in the federal state of Burgenland, where the FPÖ became the junior partner in the coalition. Coalition talks between the two regional party organisations in Burgenland were held once again in 2020 after the most recent state election (see: <https://burgenland.orf.at/stories/3032475/>).



# Belgium

2019 was a successful year for the only populist party in the Flemish region of Belgium. Within the span of one year, the Flemish Interest - Vlaams Belang (VB) more than doubled its support. While in early 2019 they stood at 11-12% in the polls, by the end of the year they surged to 27%. This made the Flemish nationalist formation the European populist party that experienced the most pronounced growth in 2019.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN BELGIUM



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Flemish Interest (VB)	ID	12%	19%

Belgian politics in 2019 followed what one may now refer to as its regular routine. Despite the federal elections held in May, at the end of the year the country was still unable to form a government and was thus and is still ruled by a caretaker government. To many, this did not come as a surprise since it was not the first time in the country's history that building a coalition proved to be difficult. What did catch Belgian society off guard, however, was the far-right breakthrough in the country. Many Belgians were reminded of the so-called Black Sunday<sup>5</sup> of 1991, when the predecessor of the Flemish Interest, the Vlaams

Bloc, rocked the Belgian political elite with a result of 6.6%.

The elections for the European Parliament (EP) in May 2019 coincided with the federal and regional elections in Belgium. In the domestic elections the Flemish Interest finished second with 18 seats in the Chamber of Representatives. This far-right party propagating Flemish nationalism had been subject to a *cordon sanitaire* that the Belgian political establishment had drawn up around it, ruling out any type of cooperation with the extremist party. The surge in the party's support had been apparent already in 2018 during the municipal elections held in Belgium, when the VB was second only to the

Greens in terms of the growth it had registered in its municipal assembly positions. At the time, however, it seemed that the conservative New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) was well-positioned to appeal to potential VB voters by offering them strong anti-immigration rhetoric of its own.

However, things played out differently. Although the N-VA did win the election, it won only roughly a quarter of the votes cast (24.8%) in stark contrast to its excellent performance in 2014, when it won almost a third of the total (ca. 32%). With a tally of 18.5% in 2019, the VB tripled its result from five years earlier (6%).

The reason behind the success of the Flemish Interest is that the party has been extraordinarily effective in appealing to young male voters. This success owed especially to one of the party's most prominent politicians, Dries Van Langenhove, who is 26 years old. Van Langenhove became nationally known as the leader of the far-right and identitarian Shields & Friends (Schild & Vrienden) movement. During the campaign period he was often attacked in the media in connection with his past as the leader of the controversial movement, but he skilfully exploited attention surrounding his persona to disseminate the messages of his party. Moreover, the party has been conducting a well-targeted online campaign to mobilise younger voters. The VB spent roughly the same amount on Facebook and Google ads as all other Flemish parties combined.<sup>6</sup>

During the campaign, the Flemish Interest focused especially on anti-Muslim messages. The most powerful moment in its campaign was in the final days before the election where the party placed posters saying "Stop the Islamisation of Belgium" on the doors of stores with Arabic language storefront signs in Antwerp. Their manifesto promised to eliminate state subsidies for mosques and end Islamic religious education in schools and deport Muslims who failed to integrate into Belgian society. A major component of their electoral success was that they also campaigned with many left-wing promises, including the pledges to restore the previous retirement age of 65 years and to introduce a pension minimum of 1,500 euros a month.

In the second half of 2019 the Flemish Interest not only managed to consolidate its position in

Flanders, but it overtook the conservative N-VA as the leading Flemish populist party with 27%. Its main competitor N-VA stood at 22% at the end of the year. It is thus unsurprising that at the VB party's congress in the fall of 2019 the party chair Tom Van Grieken was re-elected with the votes of 97% of the delegates. After his re-election, Van Grieken clearly laid out his objectives: He wanted his party to be the winner of the next general election in 2024.

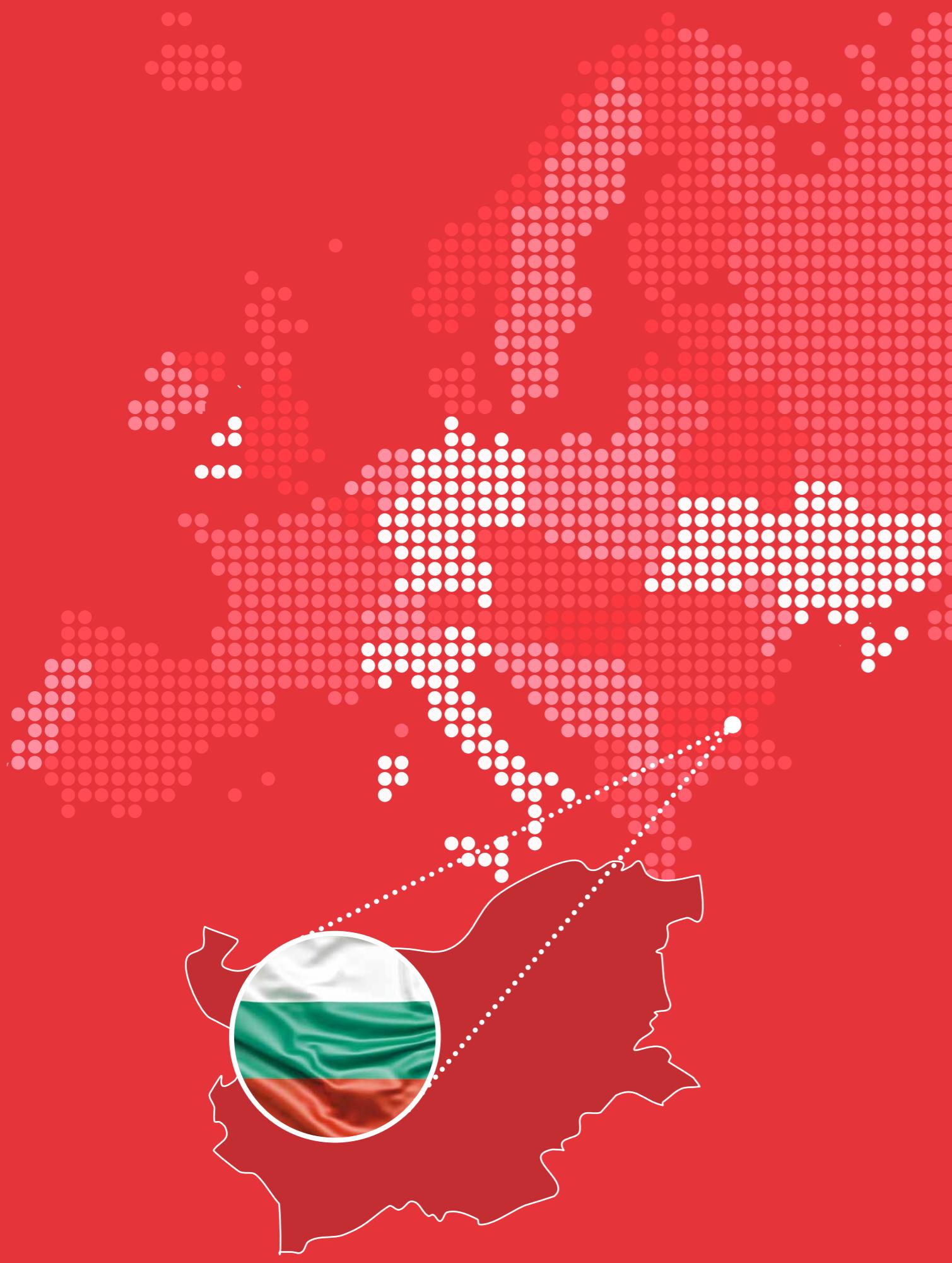
One of the reasons propelling the growing popularity of Flemish Interest towards the end of the year was that the other Belgian parties were occupied with negotiating a governing coalition. The VB was thus left without any opposition, enjoying its electoral success. The N-VA, in turn, tried still to appeal to the voters it had lost to Flemish Interest and the competition for voters between the two leading parties in Flanders is likely to continue in 2020 and beyond.<sup>7</sup> In the medium-term, it is conceivable that the N-VA and the Flemish Interest could govern together since the leaders of the New Flemish Alliance have adopted a far more conciliatory tone towards their far-right challengers than previously.<sup>8</sup> This can even indicate the possibility that if the political stalemate persists and leads to early elections in Belgium, should the two parties join forces, they might well receive a majority of the votes in the Flemish region allowing them thus to form a conservative-far-right coalition government in Flanders.

<sup>5</sup> Mudde, Cas (2003). The ideology of the extreme right. Manchester University Press, p89.

<sup>6</sup> Cerulus, Laurens. "Inside the Far Right's Flemish Victory". POLITICO, POLITICO, 2 June 2019, www.politico.eu/article/inside-the-far-rights-flemish-victory/.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, S., 2019. Flanders' new battleground: culture. POLITICO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/flanders-new-battleground-culture/>.

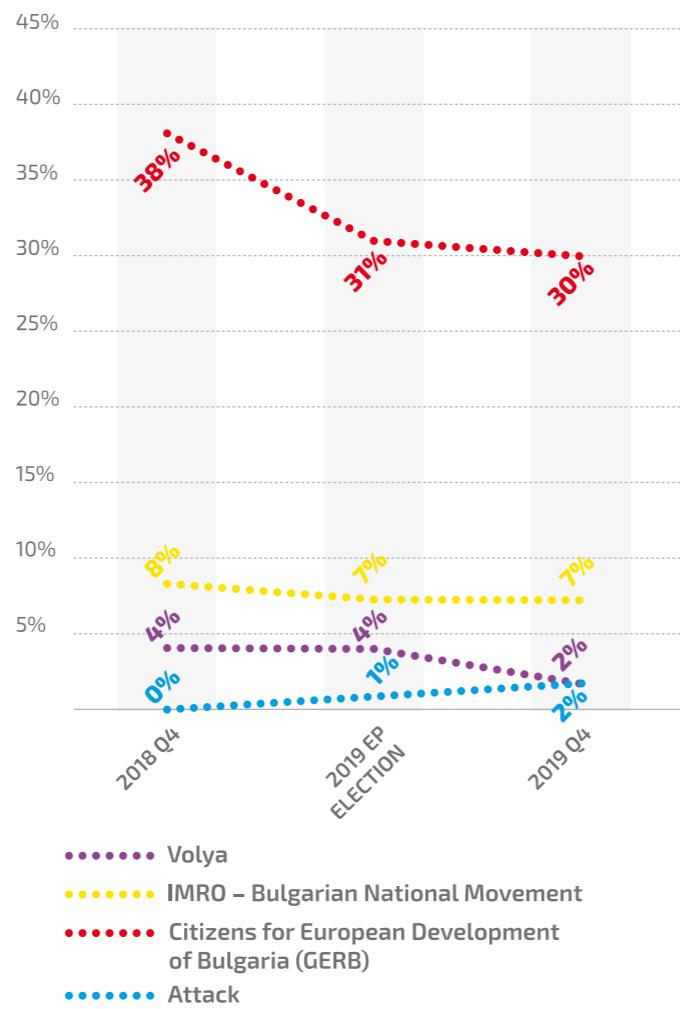
<sup>8</sup> Henne, B., 2019. N-VA et Vlaams Belang: partenaires privilégiés. RTBF Info. Available at: [https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossier/chroniques/detail\\_n-va-et-vlaams-belang-partenaires-privilieges-bertrand-henne?id=10342657](https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossier/chroniques/detail_n-va-et-vlaams-belang-partenaires-privilieges-bertrand-henne?id=10342657).



# Bulgaria

The support of the Bulgarian populist parties declined in 2019. Whilst in 2018 the aggregate support of populist parties had stood at 50% at the end of 2019, 41% of voters indicated a preference for a populist party. The governing party, the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) experienced the heaviest losses. While GERB's support had consistently stood at 37-38% in 2018, by the end of 2019 the party of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov was only supported by 30% of Bulgarians.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN BULGARIA



	Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Attack	-	0%	1%	2%
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	EPP	38%	31%	30%
Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO)	ECR	8%	7%	7%
Volya	-	4%	4%	2%

In the first half of 2019, Bulgarian politics was dominated by the scandal known as "apartment gate". It turned out that several members of the ruling GERB party had abused their positions of power to purchase luxury apartments in Sofia at below market prices.<sup>9</sup> The scandal buried the career of the person who was considered Bulgaria's second-most powerful politician, the parliamentary leader of GERB, Tsvetan Tsvetanov. Tsvetanov resigned at the end of March. The scandal also swept the minister of justice, Tssetska Tsacheva, out of office. The government promised to act decisively against anyone who had been involved in the scandal.<sup>10</sup> Trying to put the scandal behind it, GERB swiftly moved into the campaign phase of the elections to the European Parliament.

The polls in the run-up to the EP campaign predicted a very close race between the governing party and the leading opposition forces. Some of the polls even saw the government's main rival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) ahead of GERB. Nevertheless, GERB managed to secure victory and with a result of 31% it held on to its six seats in the EP in Brussels. But the real estate scandal nevertheless clearly impacted the election. For one, the campaign barely featured any discussion of issues concerning Europe. At the same time, turnout in Bulgaria was lower than in the EP election five years earlier – only a third of those entitled to vote actually turned out in 2019 – which ran counter to the trend observed in other EU Member States.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately following the EP election, preparations for the municipal elections in the fall began. Ultimately, GERB won 15 of the 28 county capitals that were up for grabs along with the national capital Sofia. Boyko Borisov made good use of his international standing and secured a meeting with US President Donald Trump at the end of the year with whom he discussed plans to boost the capabilities of the Bulgarian army as well as NATO's presence in the Black Sea. The latter is especially important as Borisov had been trying for years to strike a balance between Bulgaria's allies in the West and the country's ties to Russia.

<sup>9</sup> Rfe/rl, 2019. Bulgaria's 'Second-Most Powerful Politician' Resigns Amid Real Estate Scandal. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/deputy-chief-of-bulgaria-s-ruling-party-resigning-from-parliament-amid-real-estate-scandal/29845955.html>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://m3web.bg>, M.W., Bulgarian PM Borisov: Anyone from GERB who Succumbs to his Mentality will be Punished. Novinite.com - Sofia News Agency. Available at: [https://www.novinite.com/articles/196886/Bulgarian\\_PM\\_Borisov:\\_Anyone\\_from\\_GERB\\_who\\_Succumbs\\_to\\_his\\_Mentality\\_will\\_be\\_Punished](https://www.novinite.com/articles/196886/Bulgarian_PM_Borisov:_Anyone_from_GERB_who_Succumbs_to_his_Mentality_will_be_Punished).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the ruling GERB there are three other active populist parties in Bulgaria. Previously, these parties were all part of a single formation, the United Patriots. But in the EP election of May 2019 they ran on separate platforms. Ultimately, the Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO) emerged as the clear winner of the competition when compared to its former allies with a result of 7%. Surprisingly, the party's result was not only enough to return the party's incumbent MEP, Angel Dzhambazki, to Brussels, but IMRO also added another seat to its EP delegation, bringing in a new MEP, Andrey Slabakov. Slabakov is a former film director who was primarily active in the efforts to combat restrictions against smoking.<sup>12</sup> With their results of circa 1% each, the other two nationalist parties, Ataka and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) became practically irrelevant in Bulgarian politics. These developments accelerated the internal strife between the far-right formations. Thus, at the end of July it was announced that the United Patriots, which is part of the coalition government with GERB, expelled Ataka from its ranks.

Finally, a new face among the populist parties in Bulgaria, Volya, registered a weak year in 2019. Its 3.6% result in the EP election in May was not enough to qualify the party for a seat in Brussels. Volya's weak performance was also a blow for the French populist politician Marine Le Pen and her party, the National Rally since Le Pen visited Bulgaria twice during the campaign in the hopes of forming a joint EP group with Volya in the next term of the European Parliament.

Following the domestic turmoil in early 2019, the EP election and the subsequent municipal elections reinforced the position of the governing parties, even if GERB's overall support slightly declined. But the various corruption scandals, widespread public dissatisfaction and the ousting of several ministers suggest that 2020 will not be an easy year for the Bulgarian government, even if the next elections in Bulgaria are only scheduled for May 2021.

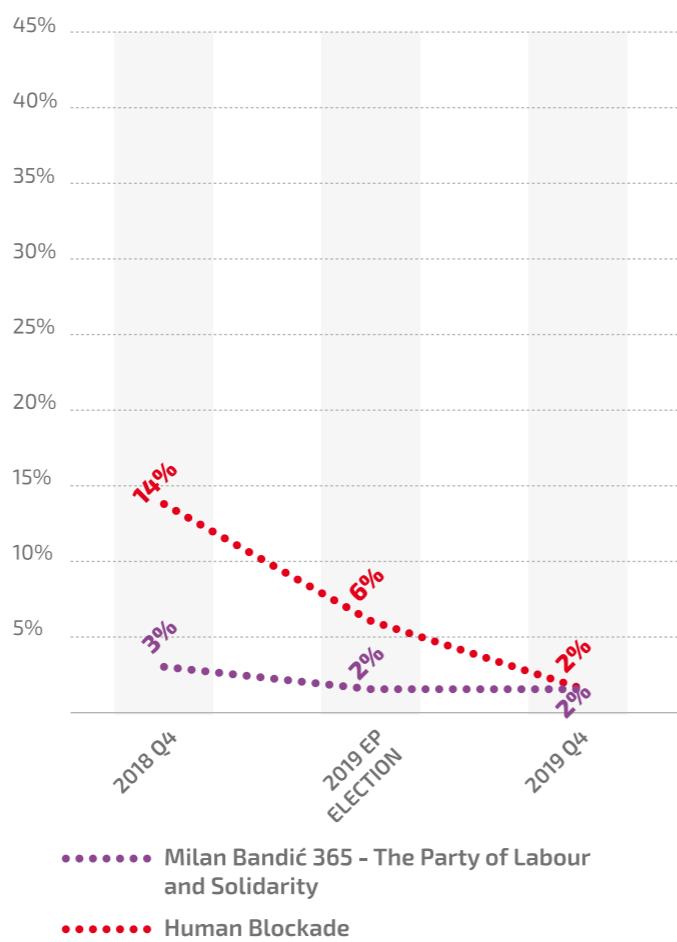
<sup>12</sup> Balcani, O. & Caucaso, European elections in Bulgaria: Borisov wins, abstention at record level. Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso. Available at: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/areas/Bulgaria/European-elections-in-Bulgaria-Borisov-wins-abstention-at-record-level-194844>.



# Croatia

The past year saw a substantial decline in the support of populist parties in Croatia: While in December 2018, 17% of the population would have opted for one of the two populist parties, by the end of 2019 these parties had dropped to a mere 4% of electoral support. The overall populist decline can be primarily explained by a drop in the support of the Human Blockade (Živi Zid). This anti-elite formation lost almost all of its supporters because of ongoing scandals, with the result that many analysts see the party being reduced to a marginal role in Croatian politics.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN CROATIA



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Human Blockade (Živi Zid)	NI	14%	6%
Milan Bandić 365 - The Party of Labour and Solidarity	-	3%	2%

The populist Human Blockade project lost support in Croatia since the party, which is often considered as the country's version of the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) has been tarnished in the wake of several scandals in 2019. One of the first scandals erupted in January 2019 when an investigative report revealed that the party had been implicated in some serious financial abuses.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See here: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/33817-zivi-zid>

Public perception and media coverage became quite negative towards the party which had campaigned on an anti-corruption but at the same time sought to undermine negative media reports and critical journalists. That was not the end of the scandals surrounding the Human Blockade, however. In April, the party's MPs got into a physical altercation with the security officers guarding parliament after ignoring the speaker's call to stay on topic, which

led to the latter's decision to have security guards remove him from the plenary; serious threats were uttered during the incident.<sup>14</sup>

An interesting development was, however, the shift in discourse of this former staunchly anti-EU party, which had called for Croatia's departure from the European Union (Croxit) that took a considerably softer stance during the campaign. Rather than calling for a Croxit, it urged a reform of the EU. This is likely related to the fact that the EU has recently risen substantially in the esteem of Croatians.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Human Blockade resorted to anti-immigration rhetoric and urged for the army to be deployed at the Croatian border in order to halt illegal immigration.<sup>16</sup> The party even received a penalty for the latter during the campaign, since unidentified individuals used the party's Facebook profile and posted comments about immigration in which they incited to hatred.<sup>17</sup>

During the EP election campaign, the Human Blockade entered into a pan-European political alliance with other populist parties, notably the Five Star Movement in Italy and Kukiz in Poland. Ultimately, the party only secured a single seat in Brussels with 5.66%. The party thus barely secured the five-percent threshold for representation in the European Parliament. This was a setback for the populist formation since it had consistently polled above 10% in several polls over a period of one year and a half prior to the election.

In addition to this, the Human Blockade party was tested further by the announcement that several of its MPs were quitting the party. All of them referred to the strict leadership practices of the party's vice-chair, Vladimira Palfi (who is the wife of the party chairman) as the reason for their decision.<sup>18</sup> The party's popularity did not improve following the surfacing of a video recording in which the party officials nearly got into a physical altercation while debating whom they should nominate as their candidates for the EP election.<sup>19</sup>

2019 was not a good year for the other Croatian populist formation either. The Milan Bandić 365 –

Labour and Solidarity Party led by the former Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić received a mere 2% in the EP election in May and the party failed to increase its levels of support later in the year. Although Bandić's party has little support in national polls, he is still influential in national politics. The party has successfully lured MPs of other parties to join its own faction in the Croatian parliament, and this has rendered the then incumbent conservative-liberal government of Andrej Plenković increasingly dependent on Bandić for a majority in parliament. In exchange, Plenković's centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party has supported Bandić in the municipal assembly of Zagreb.

The biggest issue in Croatian politics through 2020 will be how the parliamentary election scheduled for December will shape up following the victory of the country's former prime minister, the social democratic politician Zoran Milanović in the presidential election. For the time being, the most likely scenario is that the HDZ will remain the main governing party<sup>20</sup> and Human Blockade will most likely drop out of parliament. Despite the marginal public support of his party, Milan Bandić could still remain a key player in Croatian political life due to his informal influence, he remains a crucial ally of the governing parties, giving them outside support in parliament. But if he were to be found guilty in the lawsuits pending against him and is sentenced to a term in prison, that would certainly shake up Croatian political life.

<sup>14</sup> See here: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/35112-zivi-zid>

<sup>15</sup> Anon, 2019. European Parliament elections preview: Croatia. EUROPP. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/05/18/european-parliament-elections-preview-croatia/>.

<sup>16</sup> See here: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/35707-zivi-zid>

<sup>17</sup> See here: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/35776-zivi-zid>

<sup>18</sup> See here: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/36368-zivi-zid>

<sup>19</sup> See here: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/36368-zivi-zid>

<sup>20</sup> Anon, 2020. What to expect from the Croatian presidential election. EUROPP. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/12/20/what-to-expect-from-the-croatian-presidential-election/>.

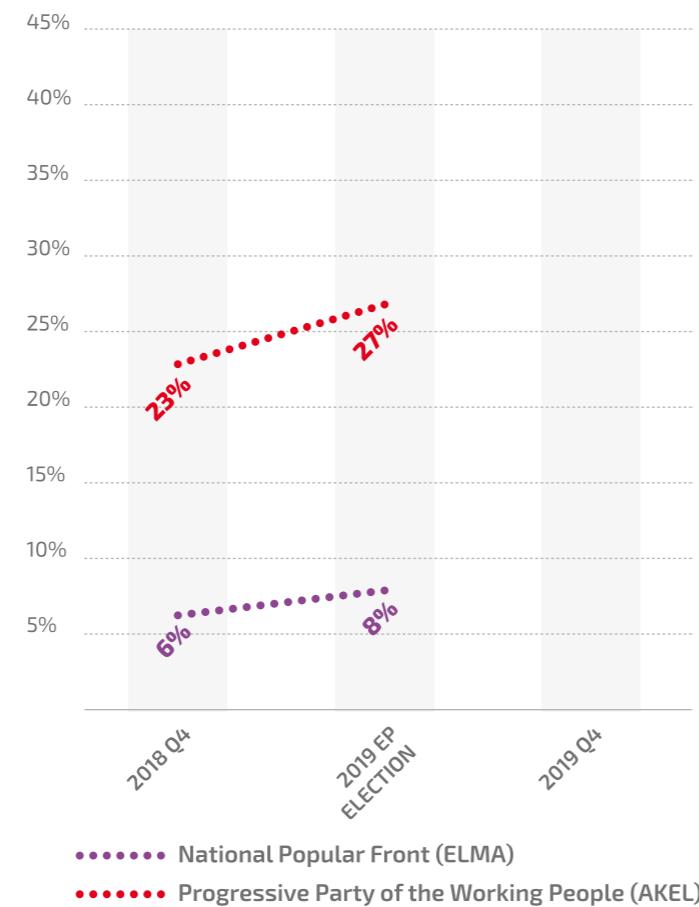


# Cyprus

Traditionally, populist parties in Cyprus have substantial support but they fared especially well in 2019. Early in the year roughly a third of Cypriots supported anti-elite formations in the EP election and these parties received a total of 35% of votes cast.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> It is important to point out that there was no representative poll of voter preferences in Cyprus during the second half of the year, which forces us to focus on the events of the first two quarters in our summary.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN CYPRUS



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
National Popular Front (ELAM)	-	6%	8%
Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL)	GUE-NGL	23%	27%

Just as in previous years, the division of the island and its economic situation were the dominant issues during the campaign for the EP election in Cyprus in May 2019.<sup>22</sup> For the first time in the history of the physically and ethnically divided island, a politician of Turkish ethnic background was elected into

office. Niyazi Kızılıyrek, a renowned Turkish Cypriot academic, won a seat in the European Parliament as a candidate of a Marxist political formation, the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL). AKEL's objective in giving Kızılıyrek a pre-eminent slot on its list for the election was to appeal to voters who long for the island to be reunited. Nevertheless, this was not enough to fully realize the party's electoral objective, since their 27% were barely enough to

secure a second place against the governing party, the Democratic Rally (DISY), which received 29% of the votes.

With its nomination of a Turkish Cypriot, AKEL also sent an unequivocal message to the international community, seeking to impress upon them that the party is serious about its commitment to unify the island. At the same time, AKEL supporters also received a tragic blow in 2019 with the passing of the party's iconic former leader, Demetris Christofias, who had led the country between 2008–2013, the most difficult period of the economic crisis.

The election was a major success for Cyprus's far-right populist party, the National Popular Front (ELAM), which is often referred to as the Cypriot Golden Dawn. Despite the fact that it ultimately failed to win a seat in the European Parliament, the extremist party received over 8% of the votes, a three-fold improvement over its tally from five years ago. ELAM mainly drew voters from the governing DISY, especially among the nationalist-minded voters living in the region adjacent to the border line dividing the island. ELAM's failure to win a seat owed primarily to the impact of tactical voting. Many of the voters supporting the green party in Cyprus, the Movement of Ecologists — Citizens' Cooperation, ended up casting their vote for the centre-left Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK) instead, thereby ultimately precluding the nationalist ELAM a seat in Brussels.<sup>23</sup>

With respect to the populist parties in Cyprus, the most important issue for 2020 will be whether AKEL can gain further strength and maybe surpass the governing DISY in terms of popularity. Another question is whether ELAM will surge further since the EP election has already shown that it successfully managed to consolidate its support – and in the event of ethnic tension, it might rise even further in the polls.

<sup>22</sup> Charalambous, G., 2019. Cyprus: An Election of 'Soft' Phenomena - Apathy, Incumbent Punishment and Far-right Consolidation. CISE. Available at: <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2019/05/31/cyprus-an-election-of-soft-phenomena-apathy-incumbent-punishment-and-far-right-consolidation/>.

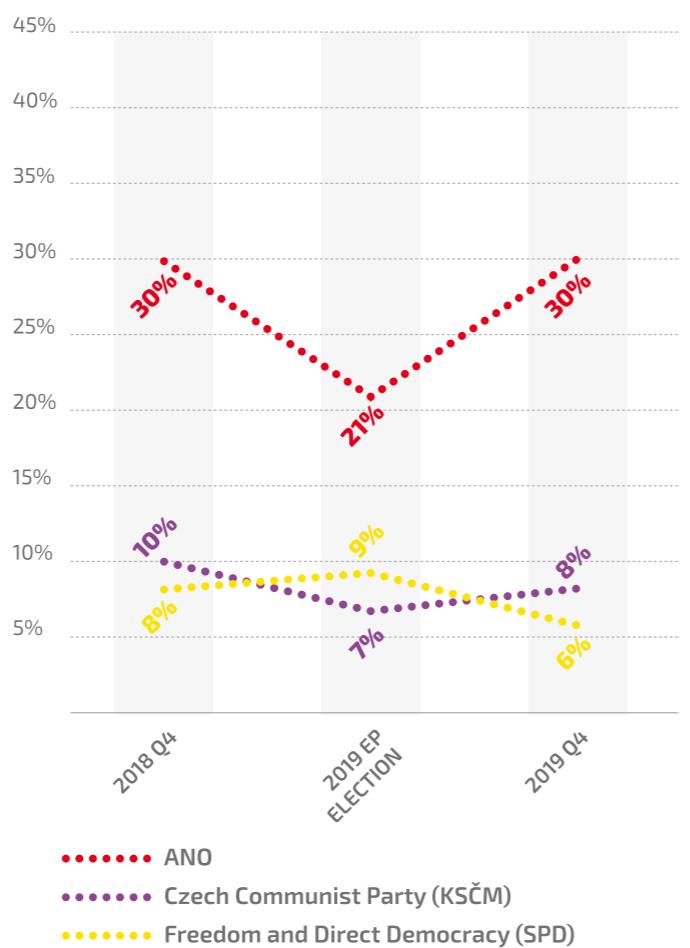
<sup>23</sup> Charalambous, G., 2019. Cyprus: An Election of 'Soft' Phenomena - Apathy, Incumbent Punishment and Far-right Consolidation. CISE. Available at: <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2019/05/31/cyprus-an-election-of-soft-phenomena-apathy-incumbent-punishment-and-far-right-consolidation/>.



# Czech Republic

The aggregate support for populist parties in Czechia is still among the highest in Europe even though there has been a slight decline in their popularity. Compared to their support at the end of 2018, when the populist parties had an aggregate support of 48%, by December 2019 they had dropped to 44% in the polls. The main Czech governing party, ANO, is still ahead in the polls, but two smaller populist parties, the Czech Communist Party (KSČM) and the far-right and xenophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), consistently hovered around the 5% threshold throughout 2019.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
ANO	Renew	30%	21%
Czech Communist Party (KSČM)	GUE-NGL	10%	7%
Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)	ID	8%	6%

Even though the polls consistently had the ANO party of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš at over 30% support, it performed rather poorly in the EP election in May 2019. The governing party campaigned primarily by calling for a stronger role of nation-state governments in the EU, for stopping immigration and promising to take action against the imports of lower quality foods into Eastern Europe. In the end, this proved enough for slightly over a fifth of all votes cast (21%). This gave the main governing party six EP seats. This was below what the polls had projected but still meant two more seats than they had managed to win in the 2014 EP election.

One reason behind the governing party's weaker than expected performance was that in the weeks before the ballot, a series of demonstrations were held against the government in Prague. The demonstration series continued after the EP election, and by the end of June 250,000 people were protesting in the capital calling on Babiš to resign because of the corruption scandals in which he was suspected to be involved. At the same time, this did not have a discernible impact on the party's support in the polls since at the mid-year mark ANO still stood at 29-30%. Furthermore, the government weathered a no-confidence motion, with only 85 out of 200 MPs voting to oust the government.<sup>24</sup> A temporary turning point in the investigations into the allegation against the prime minister came with the unexpected decision of the Prague prosecutor to stop the case from going forward despite the recommendation of the police. But in December 2019 the chief prosecutor overruled the Prague prosecutor's decision and ordered the investigation to resume its course. In the meanwhile, anti-government protests in the capital continued and the masses persisted in demanding that the prime minister resign.<sup>25</sup>

The Czech Communist Party (KSČM) in turn, as an outside supporter of the minority government made up of ANO and the Czech Social Democratic Party, managed to extract political concessions in exchange for the party's votes in parliament. Early in 2019 they threatened to withhold further support unless the Babiš cabinet would tax the compensation that the Catholic church had been

awarded in 2012 for real estate they had lost as part of the nationalisation in 1948. Ultimately, the Czech constitutional court nixed the tax, however.<sup>26</sup> The party's goal was clearly to use this issue to mobilise its base before the EP election, but the effort was met with limited success.

The KSČM did not do well in the EP election, only securing 6.9% for a single seat in the European Parliament. This was a significant drop as compared to 2014 when they had sent three representatives to Brussels. But their poor result was also a setback for the party compared to their performance in the 2017 general election when KSČM had won 8% of the votes. In the aftermath of the election, KSČM and ANO butted heads once again. The Czech government sought to replace its outdated Soviet-era Mi-24 helicopters with more modern American choppers, but the pro-Putin KSČM would have preferred to upgrade the old Russian equipment instead.<sup>27</sup> But the communists' threat to withhold their support from the government proved fruitless this time, with the government deciding to buy helicopters from Czechia's American NATO allies instead.<sup>28</sup>

The right-wing populist Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) also did not fare well in 2019. Already back in March several MPs quit the party, arguing that some SPD politicians were neo-Nazis and racists.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, their 9.1% result was enough for two seats in the EP, but it was still a weak performance compared to the parliamentary election two years earlier when the SPD had secured 11%. The disappointing result came in spite of the fact that before the election two major figures of the Western European right-wing populism, the French politician Marine Le Pen and the Dutch politician Geert Wilders had attended their campaign rallies. The party's main message during the campaign was a call for Czexit, that is Czechia's departure from the European Union, alongside a strong rejection of immigration. Against this backdrop, the party's

<sup>24</sup> Čtk, 2019. Czech Constitutional Court cancels taxation of restitution paid to churches - Prague, Czech Republic. Expats.cz Latest News & Articles - Prague and the Czech Republic. Available at: <https://news.expats.cz/weekly-czech-news/czech-constitutional-court-cancels-taxation-of-restitution-paid-to-churches/>.

<sup>25</sup> Anon, Black Hawk down? Communists could pull support for Babiš govt if Soviet Mi-24s are replaced. Radio Prague International. Available at: <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffs/black-hawk-down-communists-could-pull-support-for-Babis-govt-if-soviet-mi-24s-are-replaced>.

<sup>26</sup> Writter, S., 2019. Czech Republic to buy 12 Bell military helicopters for \$630 million. The Defense Post. Available at: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/11/12/czech-republic-purchase-uh-1y-ah-1z-helicopters-textron/>.

<sup>27</sup> Kafkadesk, 2019. Czech far-right party faces string of resignations. Kafkadesk. Available at: <https://kafkadesk.org/2019/03/20/czech-far-right-party-faces-string-of-resignations/>.

relatively weak performance was also striking because the Czech public tends to be among the most sceptical of the European Union, which should have made Czech society fairly receptive to anti-EU messages.<sup>30</sup>

Another reason why the year did not turn out well for the SPD was that many expected that the government crisis prompted by the demonstration series would lead to ANO forming a new minority government with the support of the SPD and the communists. The Czech president, Milos Zeman, also endorsed such a constellation.<sup>31</sup> Zeman spoke up in favour of the SPD on several occasions and suggested that the party led by the Czech-Japanese politician Tomi Okamura should not be labelled an extremist formation and ought to be referred to as radical instead.<sup>32</sup> In any case, the party's public perception did not improve when one of its supporters who had participated in an SPD demonstration was sentenced to a two-year suspended prison sentence for the display of totalitarian symbols.<sup>33</sup>

2020 promises to be an exciting year in Czechia since it appears that the anti-government protests will continue, while the investigations into Babiš' suspicious dealings will proceed and might bring some new and surprising details to light.

<sup>30</sup> Mortkowitz, S. & Bauerova, L., 2019. Czech Republic at heart of fight for Europe. POLITICO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/tomio-okamura-czechs-host-a-skirmish-in-the-battle-for-europe/>.

<sup>31</sup> Gosling, T., 2019. Czech government teeters as president schemes. News | Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/czech-government-teeters-president-schemes-190820150633801.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Kafkadesk, 2019. Czech President Zeman sends video-greeting to far-right party. Kafkadesk. Available at: <https://kafkadesk.org/2019/07/15/czech-president-zeman-sends-video-greeting-to-far-right-party/>.

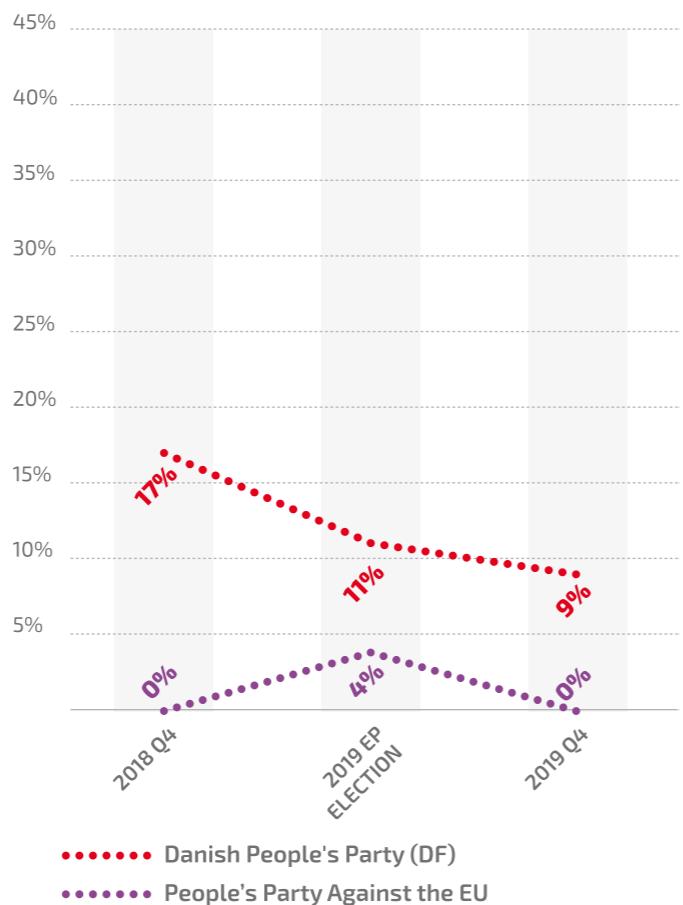
<sup>33</sup> Anon, Czech fan of ultra-nationalist party gets suspended sentence for wearing Nazi symbols to demonstration. romea.cz. Available at: <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-fan-of-ultra-nationalist-party-gets-suspended-sentence-for-wearing-nazi-symbols-to-demonstration>.



# Denmark

Denmark has seen a substantial scaling back of populist parties. These parties lost ground in both nationwide elections – the elections for the European Parliament in May and the national parliamentary elections in June 2019. Throughout the rest of the year the polls recorded declining support for the main populist party in Denmark, the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (DF) while they also reflected no discernible support for the People's Party Against the EU.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN DENMARK



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Danish People's Party (DF)	ID	17%	11%
People's Party Against the EU	-	0%	4%

Throughout most of 2018, the DF – which supported a centre-right minority government from the outside – had polled around 18–19% (with only a slight drop in the last quarter) closed 2018 with 17% of support. While this number could have been just a temporary slide, it proved to be the harbinger of a longer-term decline instead. During the first quarter of 2019 the party dropped further in the polls, down to 15% and it underperformed for its standards of the recent years in the EP election of May drawing merely 10.76% of the votes. It de facto lost about a third of the support it had held as recently as the end of 2018. The situation deteriorated for one of Europe's most successful right-wing populist

parties as in the national election a month later the DF dropped to 8.7%, losing over half of the seats it previously held in the Danish parliament, the Folketing. Its polling did not recover and remained low, stabilising at 9% throughout the rest of 2019.

The significance of these figures only becomes fully apparent when compared against the DF's earlier results. With a 26.6% score in the EP election of 2014 – one of the best results by a populist party in Europe and by far the most successful right-wing populist party in Scandinavia – the DF was the clear winner of the election, surpassing the Social Democrats by a 7.5 point margin. By the time of

the parliamentary election next year in 2015, the party dropped slightly and came third after the Social Democrats. However, its 21.1%, still made it a substantial player in the Folketing. The DF's strong position in parliament also made them a pivotal player in the formation of the government after the 2015 election. Up until the 2019 election, the Danish People's Party supported the minority government led by Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen and his Venstre party. Thus, the DF, which had initially participated in coalition talks, was involved in the government whilst at the same time it was not formally integrated into it. This precarious situation hampered DF's performance in the polls as it was perceived as being co-responsible for government policies which it did not have actual influence on.

On the one hand, the DF was being squeezed by its informal affiliation with the government and the responsibility it implied, while on the other hand its main issue, immigration, was taken up by parties on the right and the left of the political spectrum. The DF's situation has some similarities to the fate of UKIP and the Brexit Party, although the DF remains more solidly anchored in Denmark, also thanks to the impact of proportional representation.

But for now, immigration as a top wedge issue fuelling the DF's strong standing in the polls is not resonating, even if it is certainly still on the voters' radar. Denmark has always been among the most restrictive countries in the region when it came to refugees, and together with the conservative-far-right coalition government in Austria, Prime Minister Rassmussen's government pushed the idea of stopping asylum seekers from entering the EU by setting up an "unattractive location outside Europe's borders" where prospective asylum seekers would be concentrated.<sup>34</sup>

This policy was also endorsed by the leading opposition party, the Social Democrats, whose leader Mette Frederiksen went on to replace Rassmussen as prime minister in the aftermath of the 2019 national election. Coupled with the promise to preserve the traditional Danish welfare state and to boost social spending, this essentially made what one might call a conservative case for the Social Democrats. The Danish Social Democrats sought to frame both their hardline approach to immigration and their protection of the welfare

state as part of an effort to save the traditional way of Danish of life.

Thus far, this strategy seems to be enough to beat DF at its own game, since the populist party had made very similar arguments when it successfully sought to expand its electoral support over the years, including a successful appeal to working class voters who used to support the Social Democratic party.<sup>35</sup> Given that these voters could expect similar immigration policies from the centre-left Social Democrats, this "neutralised" the longstanding dividing line on immigration, allowing the centre-left's campaign to focus on issues that benefitted the left, such as climate change and welfare, where voters trust it more to deliver than the right.<sup>36</sup>

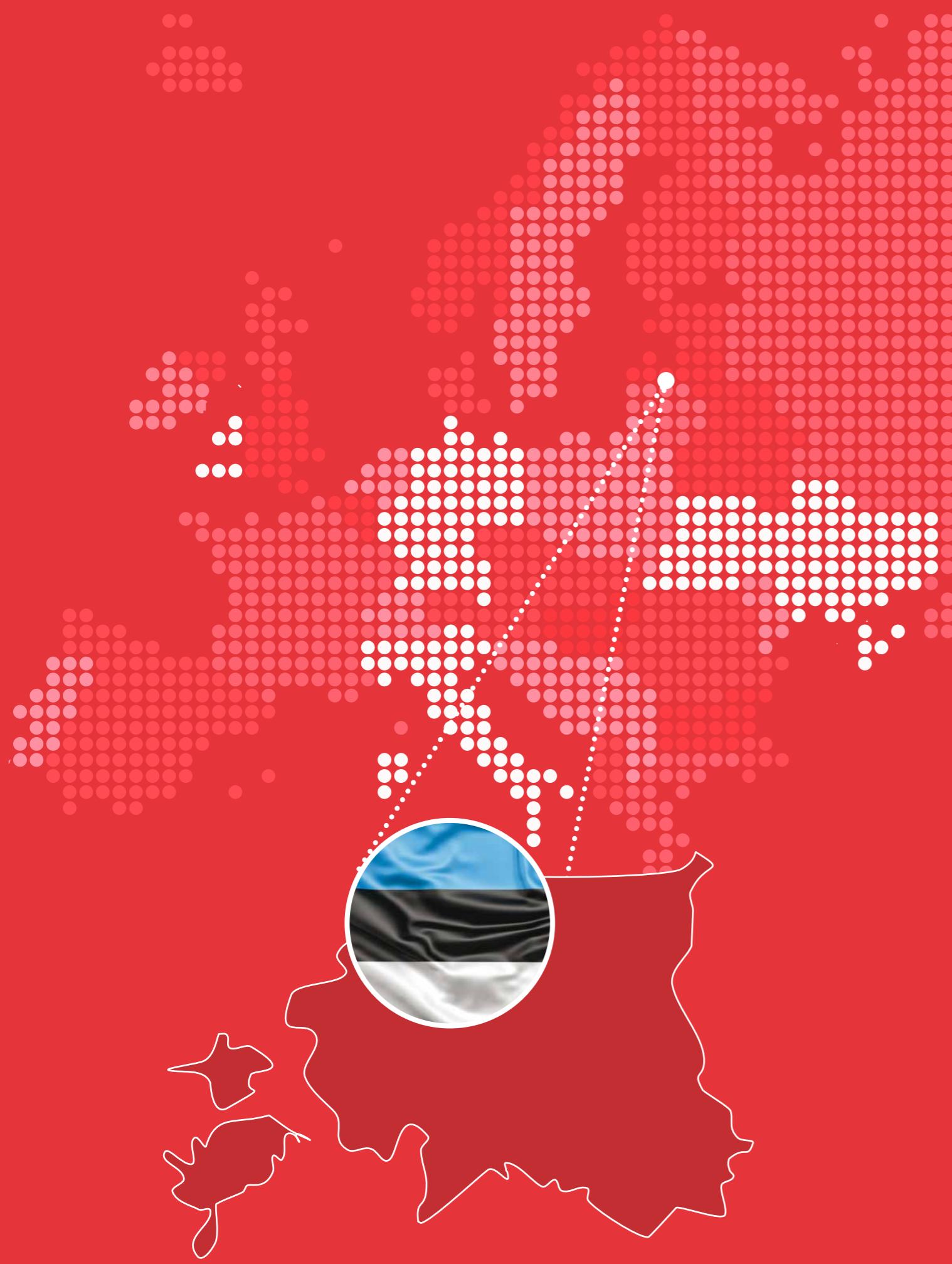
In practice, the situation was not quite as simple as the social democratic left winning back working class voters from the DF, since relatively few former DF voters opted for the Social Democrats. Moreover, the Social Democrats actually lost a little support as compared to the 2015 election, while refugee-friendly left-wing parties substantially increased their share of the vote. Nevertheless, the left overall won a decisive victory and the fact that immigration could not dominate public discourse as it had in earlier elections played a role. The DF, in the meanwhile, suffered also because it had supported a government that followed right-wing economic policies, which were not in line with the preferences of the substantial working-class segment of its party base.<sup>37</sup>

Although the DF is in a stronger position than the Brexit-focused British UKIP and Brexit parties were, the Danish People's Party is still struggling to find its footing in a political situation in which its core issue is no longer a central popular concern. How and whether right-wing populists can reinvent itself in such a situation – whether it can "revive" the immigration issue with tougher rhetoric, for instance, or whether it can successfully claim other issues – will be instructive both for other populist parties across Europe as well as for mainstream parties that might want to draw on the Danish success in marginalising their own right-wing populists.

<sup>34</sup> See here: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/06/europe-denmark-elections-humanitarian-left-far-right>

<sup>35</sup> See here: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/06/09/denmarks-social-democrats-beat-the-migrant-bashers-at-their-game>

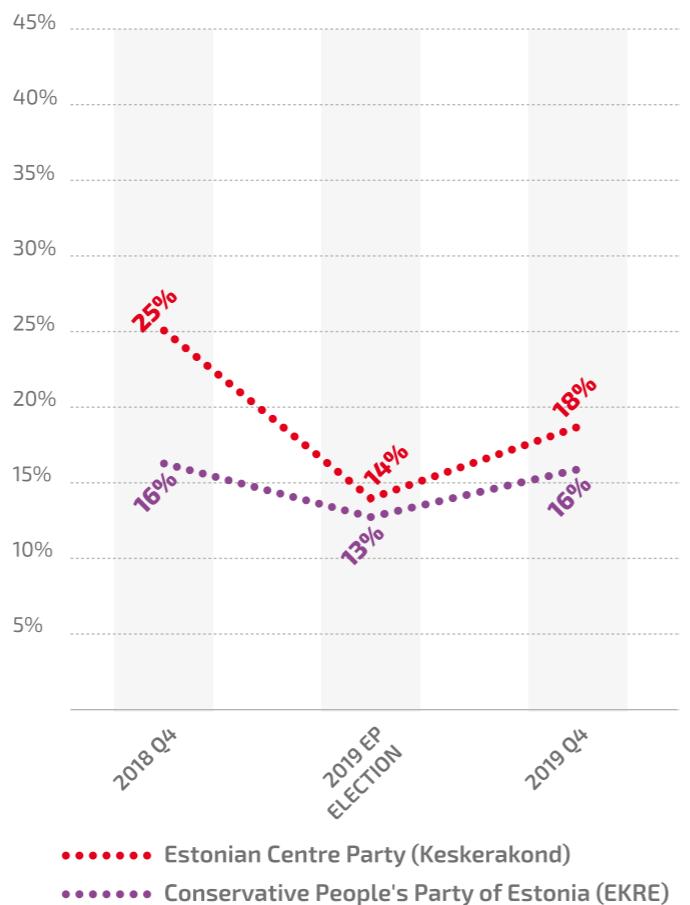
<sup>36</sup> See here: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/06/europe-denmark-elections-humanitarian-left-far-right>



# Estonia

As compared to 2018, where the aggregate support of the two populist parties in the country had consistently exceeded 40%, these parties declined in the 2019 polls. In 2019, their share of support oscillated between 32% and 35%. At the same time, there were major changes in the populist scene in Estonia. The past year saw the entry of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond - EKRE) into the government. This means that there are now two populist parties in the government of the Baltic state.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN ESTONIA



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE)	ID	16%	13%
Estonian Centre Party (Keskerakond)	Renew	25%	14%

The political situation in Estonia changed dramatically in 2019. For many years the Baltic country was held up as a model in the region because of its progressive initiatives and cutting-edge digital projects. These made Estonia seem like the most westernized country in the eastern half of the continent. But with the parliamentary election in March 2019, the wave of populist nationalism in Eastern Europe finally caught up with Estonia as well, as the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) joined the government after the March election.

In the immediate aftermath of the vote, most people were still convinced that all the political parties would

decisively reject the idea of entering into an alliance with EKRE, which was labelled as xenophobic. The governing Estonian Centre Party (Eesti Keskerakond - KESK) which has gradually moved away from populism in recent years (making its classification more complicated) campaigned mainly based on the idea of increasing welfare spending, while its rival, the liberal Estonian Reform Party (Eesti Reformierakond), focused on job creation instead. It is important to point out that the Russian speaking minority makes up a quarter of the Estonian population and it has traditionally tended to support KESK. Their situation was also a key issue in the run-up to the election. While the governing party clearly committed itself

to the Estonian-Russian bilingual education system, the Estonian Reform Party and EKRE campaigned with the promise to eliminate it.<sup>38</sup>

As anticipated, the Estonian Reform Party finished first in the general election with 29% of the votes, while KESK, the party of Jüri Ratas finished second with 23%. But EKRE came in third with 18%, more than doubling its previous representation in parliament based on their share of the votes in the 2015 election. Most observers expected that the winning Reform Party would form a government under the leadership of the first female prime minister in Estonia, but their overtures to the Centre Party asking the latter for a coalition went nowhere, as Ratas rejected their offer. Instead, he entered into a coalition with EKRE and the conservative Isamaa, which had received 11% of the votes.

The supporters of the Centre Party were disappointed with the decision to include EKRE in the governing coalition. What made the situation more controversial still was that EKRE received five ministerial portfolios in the 15-member cabinet, including the powerful ministries of the interior and of the economy. Furthermore, at the inauguration of the new cabinet, the EKRE members used hand signals to express their support for white supremacy, thus also making clear that even in government they would not make any concessions as far as their extremist views were concerned.<sup>39</sup>

Once the coalition government was installed, a new electoral test followed in the form of the EP election in May. The Estonian Centre Party dropped significantly in the EP election, presumably because its supporters resented its decision to elevate EKRE into the government. The Centre Party received only 14% of the votes, which gave them a single seat in Brussels. EKRE's support also declined, as they dropped five points as compared to their performance in the general election in March. EKRE's result of 13% was also only enough for a single seat. In the European Parliament, EKRE has become a member of the Identity and Democracy, the far-right European grouping associated with French politician Marine Le Pen and Italian politician Matteo Salvini. Just as its Italian and French peers, EKRE focused its campaign on anti-immigration rhetoric, unequivocally rejecting the idea of allowing

refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and Africa into the country.<sup>40</sup>

The rest of the year saw numerous scandals erupting around EKRE. The party members had tried to force the Estonian national police commander to resign without the knowledge of the prime minister.<sup>41</sup> This in turn, led opposition parties in parliament to file a vote of no-confidence against the government. Another scandal followed at the end of the year, when the EKRE leader Mart Helme, who is also the Estonian minister of the interior, caused a diplomatic incident with his reference to the newly elected Finnish prime minister, the 34-year-old Sanna Marin, as a "sales girl", questioning her political abilities.<sup>42</sup> This resulted in a vote of no-confidence against the minister, but ultimately the governing parties stood by Helme and he was allowed to stay in government.

EKRE was not only embroiled in a series of scandals throughout 2019 but was also subject of harsh criticisms in connection with its policies. One major issue was connected to a notorious money-laundering scheme involving the largest Danish bank. As it turned out, the money in question had been funnelled through an Estonian subsidiary. As a result, the European Union compelled the two Member States to amend the relevant laws, which the Estonian government and its EKRE finance minister purposefully delayed despite that during the campaign the party had emphatically condemned all types of money laundering activities.<sup>43</sup>

2020 is unlikely to be a smooth year in Estonia. Even though the governing coalition weathered several scandals in 2019 it is still under pressure. The scandals have left the government in a weakened position, especially since by the end of 2019 the governing parties had lost public support. At the end of December, the Centre Party had the backing of 18% of the voters, while EKRE stood at 16% in the polls. At the same time, this close result between the two parties also projects an intense competition for the top spot in Estonia in 2020. All things considered, EKRE could still become the most popular party in the country.

<sup>38</sup> ibid

<sup>39</sup> Anon, 2019. Estonia: Ratas' government still in office, failure of the opposition. Warsaw Institute. Available at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/estonia-ratas-government-still-office-failure-opposition/>.

<sup>40</sup> Anon, 2019. Estonia apologizes after minister taunts Finnish PM as "sales girl". Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-estonia-finland-minister/estonia-apologizes-after-minister-taunts-finnish-pm-as-sales-girl-idUSKBN1YK1Q2>.

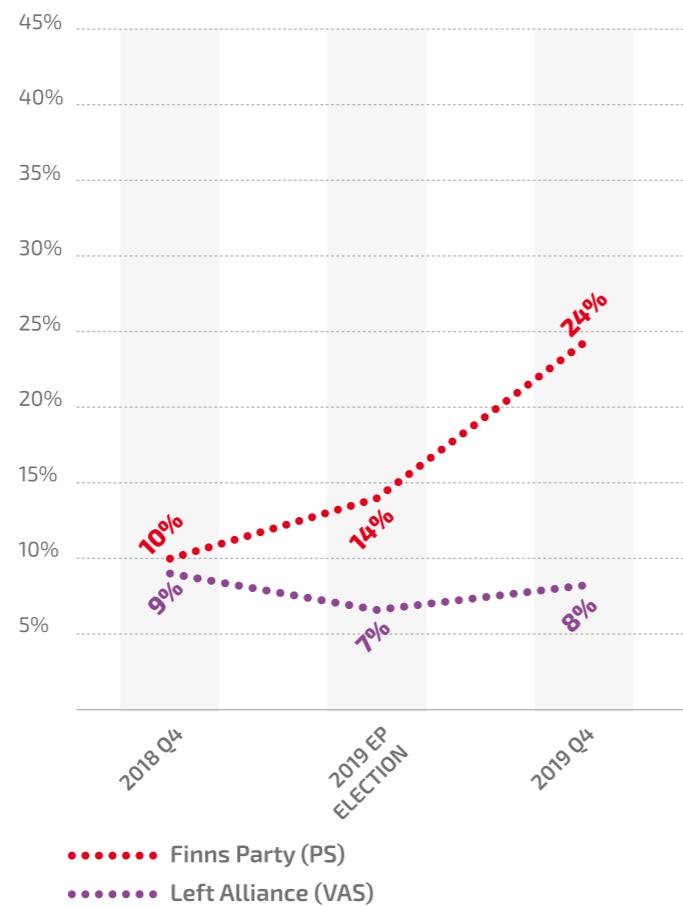
<sup>41</sup> Anon, 2019. Estonian minister blamed for slow reform after Danske scandal. CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/25/reuters-america-estonian-minister-blamed-for-slow-reform-after-danske-scandal.html>.



# Finland

In a mixed year for right-wing populists in Europe, the Finns Party (PS, formerly known as True Finns) performed exceptionally well. Moreover, the Finns' gains came in an election year and thus it boosted the party's position just when it mattered the most. Yet, the Finns' 2019 success was relative when compared to the downturn in the polls they had experienced in 2015, as the right-wing populist party's electoral support essentially remained unchanged.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN FINLAND



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Finns Party (PS)	ID	10%	14%
Left Alliance (VAS)	GUE/NGL	9%	7%

The Finns Party were the winners of the 2015 election with 17.7% of the votes in a highly fragmented political landscape (even though they lost support when compared to their best-ever result of 19.1% in 2011 where they secured third place in a more concentrated party system). In 2015, two centre-right parties, the Centre Party and the National Coalition, switched strategy to secure a majority in parliament and invited the right-wing populist party into government.

This was a major step as the right-wing populist party was out of political quarantine, but the experiment did not succeed. Within a year of becoming the top-ranked party in Finland with 17.7% of the votes, the Finns Party dropped substantially in the polls to just around 10% throughout the rest of the term. By 2017, the party had elected Jussi Halla-aho, a firebrand, as its new chairman. The party had previously suspended Halla-aho for his incendiary

rhetoric about Muslims<sup>44</sup> and his remark that "violence is these days a very undervalued method of solving problems."<sup>45</sup> As a result of his election, the parliamentary group split between moderates and the adherents of the controversial new leader, whom the coalition partners, including the prime minister, Juha Sipilä, found unacceptable. The moderates continued to support the government in parliament and as members of the cabinet, while the hardliners in the Finns Party followed the right-wing populist platform back into the opposition.<sup>46</sup> The dissidents from the mainstream party acknowledged that for them it was the end of their political careers, but they referred to their duty to keep government going.<sup>47</sup>

Initially, being back in opposition did not significantly boost the populist party's standing in the polls, but by the end of 2018, with the election in the spring approaching their polling figures started to rise. At the time of the election in April 2019, the Finns party was back at 17.5%, almost the same vote share as four years earlier. Still, the election was won by the left-wing Social Democrats, who surpassed the Finns Party for first place and were able to patch together a majority of mainstream parties.

Despite a further spike in its polling after the election in mid-April 2019, a few weeks later the Finns Party did appreciably worse in the EP election raking in 13.8% (still a one-point improvement over its 2014 total). The party secured fourth place, edging out the Centre Party by 5,000 votes. The Finns Party's disappointing showing in the EP election has not halted the party's steady rise since the end of 2018. By the end of 2019 it stood at 23%, 5 points ahead of the nearest mainstream competitor, the Social Democrats.

Some of the post-election boom experienced by the Finns Party owes to a change in the public

perception of its leader. When respondents of a public opinion poll were asked in April 2019 which party leaders they saw as having been particularly effective for their party, only 14% designated Halla-aho. At this point in time, the party chairman still trailed behind his own party's popularity in the polls. By the end of the year, however, Halla-aho decisively led among party leaders with 24% picking him – the same share of the voters who would actually vote for the Finns Party. This suggests that Halla-aho may well be pulling his party up in the polls. Whatever the case may be, for the time being, the Finns Party has a significant influence in Finnish politics and commands the support of so many voters that it will make the formation of governmental majorities with clear ideological profiles very unlikely. This situation harbours the risk of very broad-based majorities that produce the type of political standstill which could further boost populists.

The left-wing populist Left Alliance in turn has not managed to improve its standing in the polls. In fact, it has lost some support, falling gradually from 9% at the end of 2018 to 8% at the end of 2019. At the same time, it has joined the newly-formed centre-left coalition government led by the Social Democratic prime minister Sanna Marin and holds two portfolios which are seen as vital from a left-wing perspective, namely education and social affairs and healthcare. This holds out the possibility that in the event of handling its governmental responsibilities well, the left-wing populist party could improve its position in Finnish politics.

<sup>44</sup> Thus, for instance, Halla-aho had once fantasised in a blog post about a Green politician being raped by immigrants, and "[t]he Supreme Court of Finland has found him guilty of ethnic agitation for describing Islam as a "religion of paedophilia and plunder" and estimating that leeching is a national characteristic of Somalis." In 2019, under pressure from the media, he expressed regret for some of his earlier comments, making sure to apologise only for a limited set of rhetorical tools but not the underlying substance of his comments. Source: <https://www.helsingkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/politics/16360-halla-aho-says-he-regrets-expressing-views-in-a-needlessly-brutal-way.html>

<sup>45</sup> See here: <https://www.politico.eu/list/20-meeps-2018-who-matter-for-the-wrong-reasons/jussi-halla-aho/>

<sup>46</sup> See here: <https://www.ft.com/content/9d4ed4be-d73f-3942-817c-59b1ab48f338>

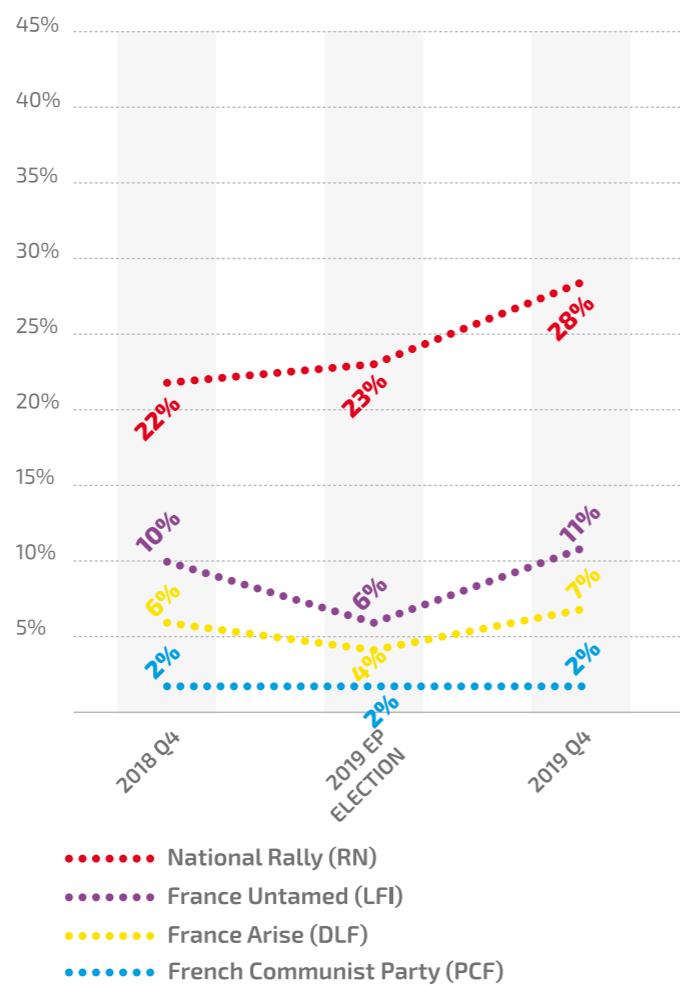
<sup>47</sup> This was actually a scenario that was very similar to the dynamics that played out when the Austrian FPÖ first joined a government led by Austrian conservatives, where it received positions that were not fully commensurate with its weight in parliament and its share of the popular vote. Subsequently, the party split on whether to stay in government, with Jörg Haider leading a "moderate" faction out of the Freedom Party and helping the government of conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel stay in office.



# France

As the centrist government was introducing unpopular pension reforms and dealing with massive strikes, the reformed far-right National Rally (RN) under Marine Le Pen has managed to portray itself as an alternative to the French political mainstream able to respond to the social and economic challenges facing the country.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN FRANCE



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
National Rally (RN)	ID	22%	23%
France Untamed (LFI)	GUE/NGL	10%	6%
France Arise (DLF)	ID	6%	4%
French Communist Party (PCF)	-	2%	2%

In 2017 Emmanuel Macron successfully thwarted Marine Le Pen's presidential aspirations. Macron handily defeated his right-wing populist challenger with 66% of the votes in the second round. But as the incumbent Macron president appears to be facing the same predicament as his predecessors, finding himself at the middle of his term with an approval rating of 37%, while 63% of the French electorate disapproves of his performance. A mere 27%, would vote for him as their first choice in a presidential election. Two years after election day, Macron is in a precarious position as his reform of the complex French pension system is deeply unpopular<sup>48</sup> and he appears to retain very little of the *élan* that carried him into office.

In the meanwhile, Marine Le Pen has a popularity of 28% among the French electorate. For a presidential election, Le Pen's support may still be too thin at this point, since one can assume that if there were a run-off between the two leading contenders, then Macron (or potentially another mainstream competitor) would draw many votes from other moderate and even far-left candidates in order to forestall a Le Pen presidency. Yet, if that scenario were to play out again in 2022, then that would mark the third time<sup>49</sup> that a centrist candidate would be elected as the lowest common denominator of a far-flung democratic alliance to stop a populist from taking office.

The scenario of a Le Pen (or other) presidency is not that far-fetched. Marine Le Pen's steady rise in the polls suggests that she might start out in a much stronger position in 2022 than she was in 2017, although between now and the next election many things can happen that may preclude a Le Pen presidency from becoming a reality.

Macron's difficulties in the EP election did not result in a further breakthrough for the populists, however, they even lost slightly in support as compared to 2014. Nevertheless, the National Rally once again came in first at 23.31%, while the five mainstream lists that cleared the 5% threshold – Macron's En Marche (22.41%), the Greens (13.47%), the centre-right Republicans (8.48%) and the Socialists (6.19%) – received the total support of only 50.5% of the electorate, with many votes going to fringe parties. The support for latter – contrasted with the low

level of support for the larger mainstream parties – indicated a fundamental dissatisfaction with the political scene even at a time when the economy was doing all right based on generally used indicators.<sup>50</sup> This calls to question as to what might happen if the fortunes of the French economy change and voters perceive that the mainstream players have all had (and wasted) their shot.

Macron's En Marche party kept Marine Le Pen out of the Elysée Palace and also prevented her party, the National Rally, from gaining substantial parliamentary presence. But it did so at the expense of the mainstream parties and the En Marche movement lacks the social embeddedness that the mainstream parties enjoyed for decades. More recently, the En Marche voters' loyalty frayed. As a result, there is a risk that at least some of them may be persuaded by Le Pen's rhetoric. Le Pen's current prospects have also improved by the fact that the far-right candidate Nicolas Dupont-Aignan of France Arise, who previously endorsed Le Pen in the 2017 run-off<sup>51</sup> stands at 6%.

Left-wing populism in France is not having a breakthrough moment as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the 2017 presidential candidate of the France Untamed party is polling at around 11% as compared to his 19.58% in the first round of the presidential election. Since then, it is clear that the far-left is not capitalising on the unpopularity of either Emmanuel Macron or the remaining centrist parties and candidates.

Presently, euro-sceptic, anti-EU parties and candidates are still supported by nearly half of French voters, which is a highly disconcerting figure for the European Union and European integration, especially coming from one of the founding countries of the EU. The hope is that, as the two past decades show, there will be a mainstream candidate who can halt the extremists from taking the French presidency and halt the rising tide of euro-scepticism. While this scenario remains a distinct and hopeful possibility, the 2019 trends show that it is nowhere near a certainty.

<sup>48</sup> See here: <https://www.ft.com/content/f7608e14-fae2-11e9-a354-36acbbb0d9b6>

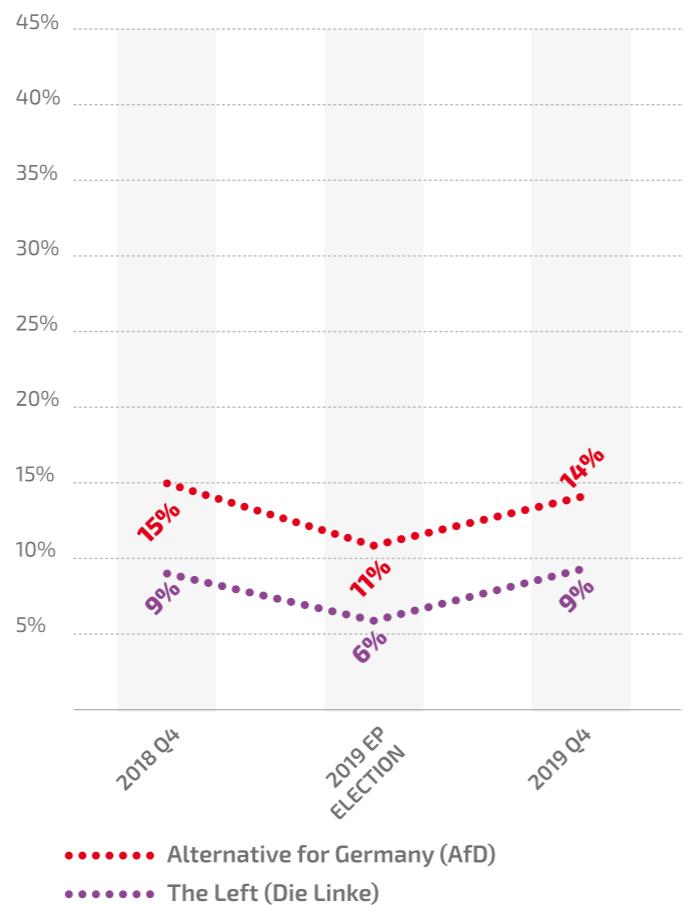
<sup>49</sup> The first was Jacques Chirac in 2002, who was re-elected despite a lacklustre first term and drawing a mere 19.88% of the votes in the first round.



# Germany

The state of populism in Germany appears to be stable. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) still enjoys a relatively high level of support but at roughly 14%-15% the party does not pose yet a systemic threat to the German political system. It is also unlikely that it becomes a major player in the federal government in the foreseeable future. This is an important difference between the AfD and its counterparts in France or Italy, whose polling far exceeds the level of AfD's support.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN GERMANY



Political Group in the European Parliament		Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	ID	15%	11%	14%
The Left (Die Linke)	GUE/NGL	9%	6%	9%

The AfD completed its sweep of Germany state parliaments with the October 2019 Bavarian state elections and it is now represented in all 16 regional assemblies. Its share of votes in a state election was lowest (5.9%) in Schleswig-Holstein in north-western Germany and highest in the eastern state of Saxony (27%). As a general trend, the AfD is doing better with every election, continuously increasing its vote and seat share in each state election.

The AfD also performed better than previous elections in every state election held in 2019 (Saxony 27.5% (+17.8% as compared to 2014); Thuringia 23.4% (+12.8% as compared to 2014); Brandenburg 23.5% (+11.3% as compared to 2014); Bremen 6.1% (+0.6% as compared to 2015). The election in Saxony marked a key moment in German politics, with the AfD becoming the leading party in a state parliament for the first time. The election in Thuringia

was another populist breakthrough, resulting in the first state parliament in which the two German populist parties, the left-wing Linke and the right-wing AfD hold a majority of seats. This constellation did not last for long and quickly gave rise to a crisis in early 2020, as it became impossible to elect a state government with the support of mainstream parties. This impasse led to the election of a centre-right prime minister delegated by the minor Free Democratic Party (FDP), who won with the votes of the AfD and the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) against the popular incumbent, a Linke politician. The tacit cooperation sent a shock through the German political system, with both Chancellor Angela Merkel and CDU chairwoman Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer insisting that they were opposed to the underlying tacit deal and calling on their regional organisation to overturn it.<sup>52</sup>

In the long-term perspective there are reasons for concern as the AfD's national-level polling figures remained relatively constant in 2019 and it has seen growing support in regional parliaments. In addition to this, the AfD has achieved such a level of support without a strong charismatic leader as seen elsewhere in Europe for right-wing populist parties in Austria, France, Hungary or Italy, for example. In fact, both the national party organisation as well many of the regional AfD organisations are split by factional conflicts between its extremist nationalist wing with ties to the neo-Nazis and its "normal" (read: slightly less extreme) nationalist wing.

The lack of experience and personal incompetence of some of the newly elected AfD politicians has also not served to project the professionalism that voters would expect from a party that aspires to governance. Yet, none of these factors has discernibly impacted the AfD's overall support, nor did any of the local scandals have a lasting negative impact on the party's polling. These suggest that the support for the right-wing populists is entrenched and structural, which gives the AfD a far better chance of long-term survival than its predecessors on the German far-right enjoyed. What is particularly disconcerting about this is the implied question of how much better the AfD might do if it had a strong, charismatic leadership figure and a more competent party management, like some of its European counterparts.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the mainstream parties and the operation of democratic politics, it is also troubling that the AfD is also successfully appealing to voters who have been absent from previous elections because these voters felt that the mainstream parties did not represent them. These voters lacked a political "home" and now they have found one in the form of the AfD and realigning these voters towards mainstream parties will not be an easy task. The increased voter turnout in regional elections, especially in the eastern states of Germany, came with a rise in the support for the right-wing populists. This shows that pre-AfD democratic politics failed to properly represent a segment of the electorate and thus far, an accounting of this failure or how it could be remedied in the future has not yet begun.

The second source of major concern pertains to the geographical trends in the support of the AfD. The nation-wide 14% support for the right-wing populist party is distributed unevenly across the country. In north-western Germany, the AfD remains comparatively weak with its support in state elections ranging between 5.9%-7.4%. In southwestern Germany, the right-wing populist party tends to attain figures that are close to its national average, that is between 10-15% (the small state of Saarland is the exception, here the AfD is weaker).

In the eastern states, however, the region of Germany that used to constitute the formerly communist German Democratic Republic, the AfD generally boasts support in excess of 20% (urbanized Berlin, with its mixed eastern and western heritage, is the exception, as the AfD received "only" 14.2% in the most recent regional election, which was four years ago, however) and has emerged as a major party, ranking second in most state elections (and first in Saxony, as we pointed out above).

While the presence of the AfD seems like a comparatively minor problem in north-western Germany and it appears at least manageable – that is without a major impact on the operation of the democratic system – in southwestern Germany, in Berlin and at the federal level as in the eastern states the AfD has a massive impact on the political process. The large AfD factions in the regional parliaments hamper coalition formation, dominate the opposition and force mainstream parties to find creative ways to side-line the AfD in operating regional parliaments and governments.

<sup>52</sup> Kramp-Karrenbauer has since announced that she will resign the party leadership, and her surprising decision was also attributed to her failure to hold the CDU in Thuringia to the party line, which forbids any type of cooperation with the AfD.

While in 2019 the AfD has established itself a solid presence in German politics, the Linke on the left side of the spectrum is closer to becoming mainstream. Coalitions made up of the two "red" parties (SPD and the Linke) and the Green Party used to be taboo-breakers, and for a long time the SPD refused to entertain the notion at the federal level. Recently, even the local Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Thuringia flirted with the idea of cooperating in some way with the Linke after the regional election yielded a populist majority in the regional parliament. While this was decisively rejected by the federal party, the developments referred to above compelled the CDU to abstain on the election of the popular Linke politician Bodo Ramelow as the state prime minister.

At the same time, Ramelow and the local Linke, which is the most popular party in the state, are an exception to a larger trend. As the post-communist successor party, the Linke used to be a strong presence in the eastern states, but it now mostly lags behind the AfD and has lost a lot of support in what was once its core territory. Its national support, by contrast, remains relatively stable for now, in large part due to small but discernible long-term gains in the West. The populist appeal of the Linke seems to be fading and its long-term support is arguably becoming more volatile as the entire left-wing of the political spectrum is faltering against a surging far-right and the Greens. At this point, the major impediment to a left-left-green coalition is no longer that it is a taboo but that at this point the two left-wing parties in such a constellation would not be enough to have a majority.

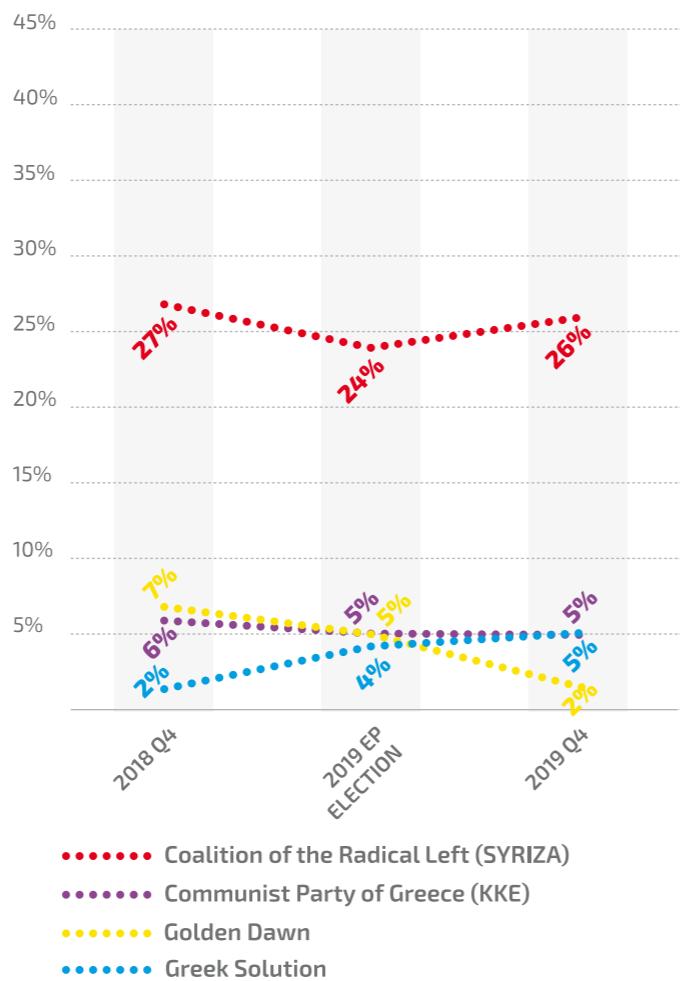
Even as the overall federal-level polls of the populist parties did not change, there are still considerable changes in the populist scene in Germany. The AfD has consolidated its position in the German party system and in terms of its average results it is now the strongest party in the country's East, whilst having a strong presence in the Southwest of Germany too. The Linke, in turn, maintained a stable level of support but has become weaker in the East but did not become a major party federally. On the whole, it is becoming increasingly clear that the challenge of populism in Germany primarily stems from right-wing populism in the form of the AfD.



# Greece

The past year saw the defeat of the left-wing populist party, turned into the Greek governing party Syriza. After four years in government, Syriza lost the election in the summer of 2019 (31.53%), even though it lost only four points as compared to their 2015 performance (35.46%). With regard to right-wing populism, however, we observed a reshuffling of the populist scene: Golden Dawn is on the verge of disappearing off the political map as it is being replaced by another far-right formation, the Greek Solution (Elliniki Lisi).

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN GREECE



In 2015, many people who disagreed with the European austerity measures vested great hopes in the newly elected Syriza government in Greece. Syriza's rise to power marked the first serious attempt in the West in the 21st century to replace neoliberal economic policy at the national level with the policies proposed by a populist left movement. Syriza's message was simple: The people should not have to pay the price for the choices of the previous economic and political elite. It is clear by now, however, that Syriza has failed to fully realise its ambitious mission.

During the Euro Crisis, many assumed that the populist left would appeal to voters who were unhappy with mainstream parties. But as the refugee crisis of 2015 arose, in many countries, the far-right xenophobic rhetoric overcame and succeeded in suppressing the growing left-wing anti-elite initiatives. Syriza was among the rare left-wing populist parties that nevertheless managed to attain governing power in this period. As Syriza governed, however, many Greek voters felt that the 2015 referendum on the austerity package and the government's subsequent manoeuvres were a betrayal of the left-wing populist party's original mission. A symbolically highly relevant aspect of Syriza's fall is that after four years of left-wing governance, the centre-right party that was recently returned to power was the one whose irresponsible policies had manoeuvred Greece to the edge of economic abyss in the first place.

In the 2019 EP elections campaign, Syriza primarily sought to persuade voters of the success of its economic policies. The governing party at the time pointed out that the unemployment rate had dropped by 10 points as compared to the peak of the crisis. Greece had been officially released from the financial bailout program which had imposed harsh austerity measures and tourism was beginning to boom again which contributed significantly to economic growth.<sup>53</sup> But there were problems, too. How the Greek government addressed the 2018 wildfires and the conflict resolution with Northern Macedonia over the name of the latter were seen as negative by many Greeks.

The agreement with Northern Macedonia is definitely of historical significance, even if it left many Greeks bitterly disappointed because they

felt it hurt their national pride, which led to Syriza's junior coalition partner, the Independent Greeks, to quit the government over the issue. The prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, asked parliament for a vote of confidence in the wake of the coalition crisis and barely prevailed in the vote. In the 2019 EP election and the subsequent municipal election in June, the governing party suffered a massive defeat against the former incumbent, the centre-right New Democracy (ND). While ND won 33% of the votes in the EP election, Syriza was backed by only 24%. In the local elections, ND's candidates won in 12 out of the 13 regions, which led to Tsipras' call for an early election.

In the national parliamentary election in July, Syriza ultimately received 31.53% of the votes, just four per cent below its total from four years earlier. Yet, the reasonably good performance was not enough against New Democracy, which won a clear majority in parliament with almost 40% of the votes, thus allowing its candidate, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, to form the new government. Syriza, for its part, is gearing up for a role as a constructive opposition party,<sup>54</sup> but thus far it has not been successful in reclaiming the voters it has previously lost: At the end of 2019, Syriza's support stood at a mere 26%, lagging far behind the governing party, which stood at 45%.

The electoral support of Greece's far-left party, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) has remained relatively stable and it received slightly over 5% of the votes in both the European and national elections. KKE used to be allied with Syriza but after the latter lost the elections, they focused primarily on attacking Tsipras arguing that the prime minister had sold workers out and had surrendered to Western capital.

Even though it got two seats in Strasbourg following the EP elections, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn failed to clear the parliamentary threshold in the national election and did not return to the national parliament (2.93%). Like Syriza, Golden Dawn too had begun its rise in the wake of the economic crisis. Its potent mix of anti-austerity and xenophobic rhetoric catapulted it to the rank of the third party in the polls in for a while in 2015/2016. But the party's reputation suffered in connection with legal proceedings against two of its members, one who was accused of murdering an

<sup>53</sup> Lowen, M., 2019. SYRIZA Leader Tsipras: Our Target is Constructive, Strong Opposition (Vid). The National Herald. Available at: <https://www.thenationalherald.com/260798/syriza-leader-tsipras-our-target-is-constructive-and-strong-opposition-vid/>.

anti-fascist rapper back in 2013 and its party chair Nikos Mihaloliakos, who was accused of operating a criminal organisation.

As Golden Dawn disappeared, a new extremist formation called Greek Solution came to the fore. The party had been founded in 2016 by Kyriakos Velopoulos, a former member of the right-wing populist Popular Orthodox Rally. Their demands include the call for a 200-kilometre-long wall along the Turkish border in order to keep migrants out, the immediate deportation of illegal migrants as well as the “immediate expulsion” of NGOs involved in helping refugees.<sup>55</sup> The former television salesman Velopoulos considers the star of the European populist right, Viktor Orbán, as his role model, and he also speaks admiringly about Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump.<sup>56</sup> Seeing that Golden Dawn had faded, Greek nationalists increasingly turned towards Velopoulos’ new movement.

Whether Alexis Tsipras can breathe life back into Syriza or whether Greece’s experiment with the populist left will have failed for good is the big question of 2020. What is already apparent, however, is that despite the political marginalisation of Golden Dawn, there is still support for far-right politics in Greece.

<sup>55</sup> Al Jazeera, 2019. Neo-fascist Golden Dawn party crashes out of Greek parliament. Greece News | Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/neo-fascist-golden-dawn-party-crashes-greek-parliament-190708060921804.html>.

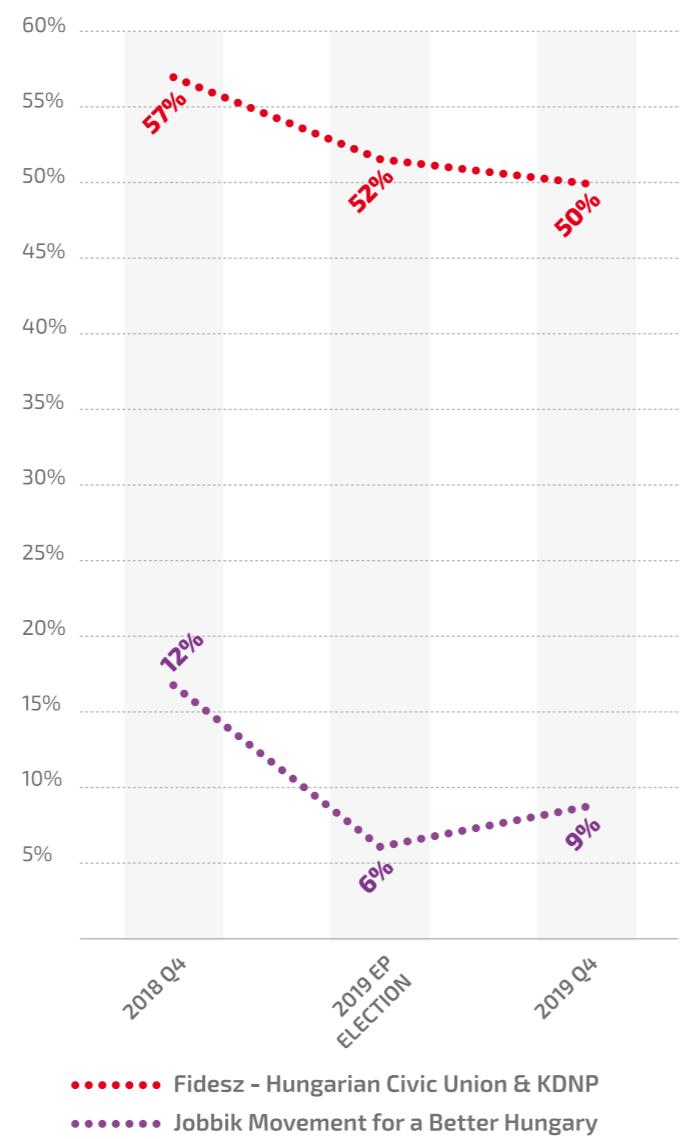
<sup>56</sup> Stamouli, N., 2019. The unorthodox Greek. POLITICO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/greek-solution-far-right-kyriakos-velopoulos-unorthodox-migration-votes/>.



# Hungary

By now Hungary has acquired an international reputation as the poster child for populism in the European Union. Hungarian populist parties have boasted the highest levels of public support for several years now, leaving the vast majority of other EU countries behind on this indicator. Hungary was also for a long time the only country in which both the major governing party (Fidesz) and the main opposition party (Jobbik) in parliament were populist parties. In 2019, we experienced a 10-percent drop in their accumulated popularity, and also Jobbik lost its position as the leading opposition party.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN HUNGARY



At the beginning of 2019, the ruling party Fidesz started losing a few points in the polls, and its popularity decreased from 57% to 54%. At the last quarter of the year, its support dropped back to 50%, which is still a record among European populist parties. The smaller populist party, Jobbik lost

significant support too dropping from 14% at the beginning of the year to 9% at the end of 2019 (and its support was even lower at some points during the year). For Jobbik, this situation marks a critical change considering that it received 19% in the last national parliamentary election in April 2018.

Two changes in particular stand out. First, although Fidesz has retained its commanding lead in terms of popularity among likely voters, and even managed to convert it into a massive victory in the EP election in May (52.14%), in the municipal elections in October it suffered the first major electoral setback in almost a decade and a half. Specifically, October 2019 marked the first time since the local elections in 2006 (when Fidesz swept virtually all major municipalities across the country<sup>57</sup> and has held them ever since) that Fidesz lost in large swathes of Hungary, ceding the mayoralties of Hungary's capital, Budapest (home to almost 1 in 5 Hungarians) as well as roughly half of its major urban areas (such as Pécs, Miskolc and Szombathely) to the opposition, which now includes Jobbik.

Yet, while this is a major change in terms of the outcome, it was not a result of shifting popular preferences: Fidesz lost despite the fact its vote share was roughly the same as in previous elections. Two major factors combined against Fidesz in this particular setting. First, except for the EP election, the Hungarian majoritarian electoral system gives the largest party a disproportional advantage over a divided opposition, even if the aggregated vote share of the latter is equal to that of the larger party or even surpasses it. Since the majority of parliamentary seats, mayoralties and local assembly seats are allocated on the basis of winner-takes-all contests, Fidesz has been winning a disproportionately high number of these as compared to its vote share because its candidates almost always ran against a divided opposition that fielded several candidates. In October 2019 that changed, with the opposition uniting in large parts of the country to accommodate the logic of the Hungarian electoral system. Thus, by combining their electoral clout they managed to win in many places where their joint strength had exceeded Fidesz for a while now.

In another part, the opposition victories in urban areas stemmed also from the growing urban-rural divide, which has always existed but has become more pronounced in recent years, as Fidesz has managed to expand its lead in rural areas while it lost support in urban areas. Much like in other countries, Fidesz's populist appeal resonates well with rural voters, but on the whole it makes less of an impression on urban voters.

<sup>57</sup> Many of the tiny ones among Hungary's profusion of municipalities (3,200 for a country of less than 10 million) are controlled by independent mayors and municipal assembly-members.

The other major transformation in the populist scene concerns Hungary's former leading far-right party, Jobbik, which has made its centrist reorientation more emphatic than ever before. The once anti-EU, anti-Semitic and anti-Roma party is now among the most vociferous defenders of Hungary's EU membership, with the new party chairman Péter Jakab arguing that Fidesz has failed to exploit the historic opportunity stemming from EU accession. Jobbik also aspires to membership in the European People's Party in the EP (even as Fidesz's own membership is in limbo<sup>58</sup>), and it has brought its political manifesto and rhetoric in line with that ambition (although local politicians sometimes continue to communicate in the classic far-right way, the party tends to act more decisively than previously in disciplining racist and extremist comments). Jobbik's centrist drift has been one of the key prerequisites for the successful electoral cooperation/coordination that gave rise to the opposition's election victories in October 2019, which Jobbik voters facilitated in some regions and from which Jobbik politicians profited in the form of mayoralties and municipal assembly seats in others.

At the same time, Jobbik's reorientation – which is now enduring enough to merit a review of its status as a populist party – has clearly cost the party a lot in popular support. It very likely lost some of its old supporters already at the time of the 2018 national election, but because of new centrist voters it added that barely manifested itself in its overall tally, which stood at roughly 20%, the same as four years earlier.<sup>59</sup> Since 2018, however, the party has been losing support gradually, with some former voters joining the ranks of the extremist Jobbik split-off Our Homeland, which quickly attracted the most hardline far-right elements in Jobbik, while others have turned towards Fidesz or are without a party for the time being.

Jobbik's low-point was the EP election in May 2019, when its 6.34% made it the third-largest opposition party, a massive drop as compared to the 19% it received in the national election in 2018, both in terms of its vote share and with respect to its relative position among the opposition parties. Ultimately, while it regained some of the lost support and managed to climb back to 9% at the end of 2019,

<sup>58</sup> Fidesz's membership in the EPP is currently suspended due to discomfort in the European party family about the governing party's anti-democratic policies.

<sup>59</sup> In fact, given the increased turnout in absolute numbers Jobbik actually added voters.

based on the polls at least Jobbik can no longer lay a claim to being the leading opposition party. The far-right Our Homeland, in the meanwhile, lingers well below the 5% threshold but has won over some 2-3% of voters who were most likely Jobbik supporters previously.

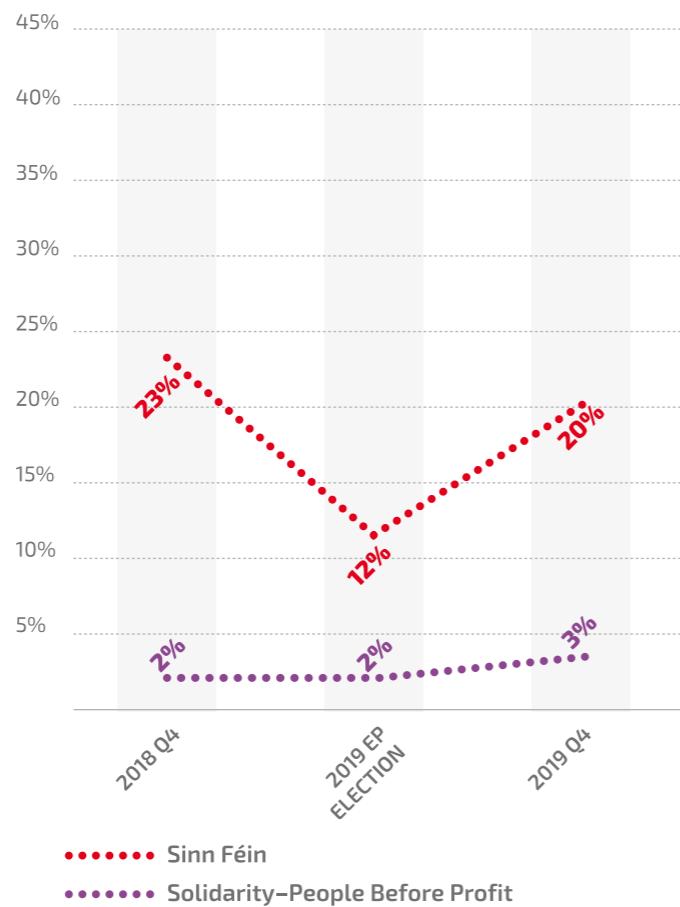
Thus, on the whole, the high level of support for populist parties remains broadly unchanged in Hungary. But looking at the issue in more detail, Jobbik's reorientation and its concomitant loss of public support have arguably moved a sizeable chunk of voters who used to support populist parties out of the populist orbit. And while some of these voters have ended up with the far-right Our Homeland party (which stands at 2% in the polls), on the whole the net support for populist parties in Hungary has declined. But the bulk of the strength of populism in Hungary – both in terms of popular support and in access to governmental power – is still anchored in the ruling Fidesz party. Due to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's cross-border influence as a populist trendsetter, the future success of his populist experiment will exert an impact far beyond Hungary and sway our perception of the success of the EU-wide populist movement.



# Ireland

The trend in Ireland is unusual against the backdrop of a Europe where the right-wing populism is still dominant among populist parties. Ireland's offsetting trend relates to a great extent to the evolution of Irish nationalism in the shadow of the British Empire, which gave the nationalist movement a distinctly left-wing – and often ethnically tolerant – inclination.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN IRELAND



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Sinn Féin	GUE/NGL	23%	12%
Solidarity-People Before Profit	-	2%	3%

What we are witnessing in some parts of Europe is that the far-right is trying to secure support outside its traditional voter base by trying to appeal to working class voters who used to support the centre-left or the far-left. These voters are drawn by the allure of welfare chauvinism as the far-right extends the promise of retaining the welfare state whilst reserving its benefits for those who are part of the ethno-cultural majority. In Ireland, by contrast, somewhat of the opposite seems to be happening. Irish nationalism has been infused with left-wing ideas for some time and as a result

the populist-nationalist terrain continues to be dominated by a party that is allied with the far-left in the European Parliament, namely Sinn Fein.

Populism in Ireland was growing in 2019, but, unlike elsewhere in Europe it did not benefit the far-right but the left-wing populist party Sinn Fein instead. At the same time, the causes of Sinn Fein's rise are at least partly similar to the reasons that have fuelled the rise of populists elsewhere in the continent. Many in Ireland have a negative impression over the centrist Fianna Fáil and the centre-right Fine

Gael as the main parties alternating power. Voters perceived these two parties as disappointing in how they addressed the key issues in the run-up of the 2020 election, namely healthcare and housing.<sup>60</sup> Especially for many young people in Ireland, traditional politics have failed to address the difficulties of "Generation Rent."<sup>61</sup> Irish politics was also affected by Brexit, and to some extent, it entailed the possibility of a separation between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. This situation in turn, opened up the thinking on some sort of potential unification of Ireland.

Sinn Fein, a party with political presence in both regions of Ireland and in its two parliaments, the Irish parliament Dail and the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Stormont, benefitted from the growing focus on what is arguably its flagship issue, Irish nationalism. What is more, Sinn Fein addressed a key concern of Irish voters, namely healthcare and it has been pushing for cross-cutting policies in the country, such as a joint healthcare system modelled on the British National Health Service for years, in line with its longstanding opposition to austerity policies. Sinn Fein was also pushing for an "all-Ireland forum" to be followed by a referendum on the island's unification within five years.<sup>62</sup>

This appeal to nationalism was combined with an ambitious social program announced by the newly elected Sinn Fein leader, Mary Lou McDonald, who referred to her plan as Ireland's "new deal". McDonald's proposed plan was to "increase pay, tackle the housing crisis, improve childcare, health and education options, address the challenge of climate change and plan for Irish unity."<sup>63</sup> Sinn Fein and another smaller, left-wing populist party called Solidarity-People Before Profit exerted pressure on socio-economic and environmental issues and ultimately impacted Ireland's public agenda and governmental policy. Thus, for example, in December 2019 Prime Minister Leo Varadkar defended his government's record on housing saying that a lot of new homes had been built by his government already and pledging at the same time that a further 25,000 would be built in 2020, with

<sup>60</sup> See here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/irish-times-poll-health-and-housing-most-important-issues-for-voters-1.4161805> and <https://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/fine-gael-and-fianna-fail-are-both-out-of-touch-with-problems-of-generation-rent-38945552.html>

<sup>61</sup> See here: <https://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/fine-gael-and-fianna-fail-are-both-out-of-touch-with-problems-of-generation-rent-38945552.html>

<sup>62</sup> See here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/mary-lou-mcdonald-calls-for-new-deal-to-plan-for-irish-unity-1.4085530>

<sup>63</sup> See here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/mary-lou-mcdonald-calls-for-new-deal-to-plan-for-irish-unity-1.4085530>

11,000 of those going to people "in need of social housing"<sup>64</sup>

Another example of such impact is how the then incumbent prime minister, Leo Varadkar of Fine Gael began to address the country's unification, which the traditional Irish parties have not pursued, unlike Sinn Fein. In the event that "Britain takes Northern Ireland out of the European Union against the wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland – takes away their European citizenship and undermines the Good Friday Agreement," Varadkar said, the question of unification "will arise, whether we like it or not."

Sinn Fein proved fortunate in 2019 and early 2020 that its traditional issue, Irish nationalism, as well as its longstanding focus on socio-economic issues, were at the centre of voters' concerns, while established parties had failed over time to make meaningful progress on either of these areas. Although Sinn Fein's support slumped in mid-2019 and it secured only 11.7% in the EP election in May, by the end of the year, with the election campaign approaching, it was back at 20% gaining momentum in late November.

While Sinn Fein is not exactly a strong EU enthusiast it is nevertheless firmly committed to EU membership, also seeing the European Union as a factor in tying the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland. So, Sinn Fein is not a disruptor to the same extent as many of the surging populist parties in Europe and, moreover, despite its strong pulling numbers it continues to be a median-sized player in terms of its parliamentary support.

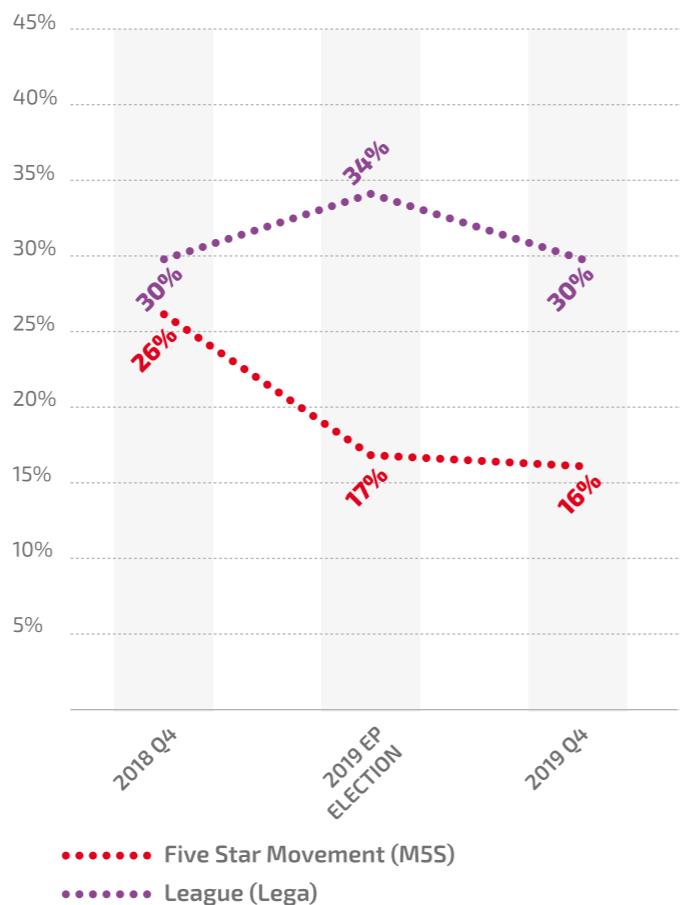


# Italy

In 2018 Italy embarked on one of the most significant populist experiments that the EU had seen to date: A coalition made up of two opposing populist parties with many conflicting goals decided to join forces in parliament to form a new government, lining up behind an unaffiliated and independent prime minister. What rendered the experiment even more unusual was that Italy's government included a far-right populist party, the Lega<sup>65</sup> and an idiosyncratic party, the Five Star Movement.

<sup>65</sup> Formerly known as the Northern League, the party had been initially created with the goal of helping Northern Italy to become independent of Italy because the founders felt that the South was dragging the economically developed North down.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN ITALY



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Five Star Movement (M5S)	NI	26%	17%
League (Lega)	ID	30%	34%

With 32.7% of the popular vote, the Five Star Movement became the largest party in parliament after the 2018 election. As it did not secure an outright majority it needed a coalition partner to govern. Rather than joining with the so perceived establishment centre-left Democratic Party, which arguably may have been closer to it ideologically, it made clear that it was more interested in breaking with traditional politics than in ideological proximity. This was the reason why the Five Star Movement entered into a coalition with a far-right disruptor, the Lega party. The alliance between the

two very different parties was uneasy from the start. Symptomatic of the difficulty of their future cooperation was their choice of an independent prime minister, the highly regarded legal scholar Giuseppe Conte, to lead them.

The magnitude of the populist parties' electoral victory (together, the two populist parties won over 50% of the popular votes and had a comfortable parliamentary majority), their decision to join forces despite their ideological differences, merely united by their mutual populism, - and the fact that all this

happened in one of the largest EU member states - gave the Italian populist coalition monumental importance. In the end, however, the Italian populist government did not create a crisis for the European Union as this coalition did not last for long. In fact, for Italy and the EU, one of the key 2019 events was the breakdown of the populist coalition in Italy, as the Lega leader and deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, emboldened by the growing popularity of the Lega, finally quit the coalition, ending a cooperation that had been marked by endless conflict. Salvini's tactical calculation was that the government would not survive without the Lega's support, thus forcing an early election that would make the Lega the strongest force by far and leaving Salvini as the obvious choice to lead the next government.

Salvini's strategy may yet pay off in the long run, but for the time being a surprise move by its former coalition partner, the Five Star Movement has resulted in blocking the immediate realisation of Salvini's political dream. Forced to choose between an electoral meltdown and an immediate election in the final quarter of 2019,<sup>66</sup> the Five Star Movement chose instead to take a huge leap and abandon one of its core principles by forming a coalition with an establishment party, the centre-left Democratic Party.

This gave the government led by Prime Minister Conte a new lease on life and might have given both him and the Five Star Movement the opportunity to serve out their full term, with the implied chance of improving the party's polling data before it has to face voters again.

Embracing one of the establishment parties was a difficult choice for the Five Star Movement as the party's core message on which it coasted to political victory in the last election was the rejection of the previous political elite. As pointed out above, it was also the reason why it ultimately opted for the very difficult partnership with the far-right rather than settling immediately for the centre-left party it ultimately embraced a year later to avoid a snap election.

Since the Five Star Movement has seen its support massively drop even before abandoning its core promise, it must now offer voters a good argument

for why its continued presence in the government is to be valued, despite the fact that the government has thus far shown few major achievements. For the time being, its best defence for this decision is that despite its dropping popularity, Prime Minister Conte himself is highly regarded by the public. It is not clear, however, whether in the long run his popularity can improve public perception towards the Five Star Movement, especially as long as Conte insists on keeping his distance from the party.

For those, however, who are concerned about populism and the noxious impact of a powerful far-right group such as the Lega in particular, the current government is a reprieve. A moderate and establishment party with a deep commitment to the European Union – something that could not be said of either governing party before the populist coalition fell apart – is now back in government and it has considerable leverage over the Five Star Movement. At present, the Five Star Movement is out of coalition options and is at a low point in the polls. This gives the Democratic Party an influence beyond what its share of votes in the last election suggested, which at 18.8% was 14 points lower than that of the Five Star Movement.

Italy's first experiment of a fully populist government has created far less of a rupture than what was expected and feared. The Five Star Movement is unlikely to create much havoc for the remainder of its term as it simply lacks the parliamentary majority for enacting far-reaching changes on its own and is unlikely to find a coalition partner who would support it in major undertakings that could harm the EU. The Lega is not likely to back such proposals because it no longer has an interest in propping up the government and the DP is fundamentally against supporting anti-EU policies.

Still, Italy's experience with populism is far from over. The Five Star Movement is still the main governing party and Salvini and Lega is still doing well in the poll numbers that continuously project the far-right party winning the next election by a comfortable margin. There's still a big risk that it will be able to govern with the centre-right, as it had originally planned.

But it is worthwhile to briefly take stock of the factors that led to the temporary reprieve that this new coalition brings. First, as far as populist experiments go, from a non-populist perspective,

<sup>66</sup> The Five Star Movement stood to lose almost half of its vote share since its popular support had dropped to under 20% for most of 2019 (despite a slight increase in the third quarter, it ended the year at 16%).

it mattered that the Five Star Movement is not an ideologically rigid organisation, neither dogmatically committed to far-right or far-left visions of social upheaval, but pragmatic and within the ideological mainstream on many issues. Its populism is mostly centred on the rejection of the existing political class rather than a rejection of the core ideological values of mainstream politics. Second, a key factor was that there was a coalition government in which the two parties (and the prime minister) acted as a check on each other, reigning in potentially problematic excesses. Even if there had been a desire to subvert the democratic process as such, it would have still been unlikely for them to find a mutually agreed upon solution to that end. Finally, Giuseppe Conte has turned out to be a reasonable choice for leading the government and he has earned himself the respect of both large swathes of the Italian public as well as Italy's European partners.

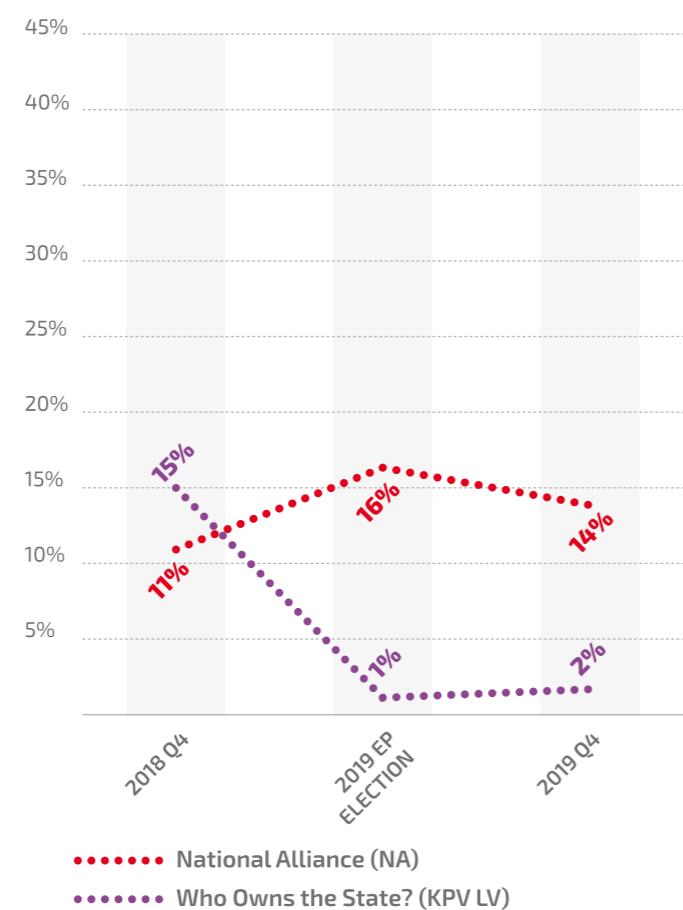
The worst-case scenario for Italy may yet come, that is if Salvini returns to power after the next election as the dominant figure in a new government. Such a scenario is not that far-fetched as, at this point, he is persistently leading in the polls. His lead in the polls coupled with his harsh anti-EU stance, xenophobia and sympathy for far-right views in general, as well as his desire to emulate the more authoritarian policies observed in Hungary and Poland for example, will pose a greater risk for Italy and the EU than the often divided and ineffective populist coalition could be before it fell apart in 2019.



# Latvia

The support of populist parties in Latvia dropped significantly when compared to the preceding year. While at the end of 2018 over a quarter of Latvian voters would have opted for one of the populist parties, in 2019 their aggregate support was consistently below 20%. Nevertheless, the populist trends in the country are more nuanced. The most successful populist party in 2018, the Who Owns the State? (KPV LV) collapsed in 2019 and was no longer discernible in the polls, while the National Alliance (Nacionālā apvienība - NA), by contrast, polled over 10% throughout most of 2019.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN LATVIA



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
National Alliance (NA)	ECR	11%	16%
Who Owns the State? (KPV LV)	-	15%	1%

There was a political stalemate at the end of 2018 in Latvia since the coalition talks did not yield a majority for any of the parties that ran for election. Neither Jānis Bordāns of the New Conservatives nor Aldis Gobzems of Who Owns the State? was able to conclude a coalition agreement with the other parties. Ultimately, the failed coalition-building efforts gave rise to a curious five-party coalition in Latvia, in which smallest parliamentary party, the New Unity, was given the prime minister's seat. The governing coalition included both populist parties, the National Alliance as well as the Who Owns the

State? party. The KPV LV was given the economy, interior and welfare portfolios, while National Alliance politicians are at the helm of the culture and agricultural ministries.<sup>67</sup>

KPV LV experienced some internal division after the government formation. Once the coalition agreement was signed, two key politicians Aldis Gobzems, who had been previously tasked with trying to form a government and the party's co-

<sup>67</sup> Eng.lsm.lv, 2019. Latvia gets a new government led by Krišjānis Kariņš. / Article / Eng.lsm.lv. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/latvia-gets-a-new-government-led-by-krisjanis-karins.a306967/>.

chair, Linda Liepina, quit the party because they were against the coalition that had been formed.<sup>68</sup> But even these departures proved insufficient to appease the strife in the party leadership, while the earlier supporters of KPV LV also found it difficult to accept that the party that had previously criticised the political elite had now entered in a coalition government with them. The party steeply declined in the polls. Compared to their election result in October 2018, its support was halved by the end of the first quarter and in the EP election in May their total fell below 1%. In addition to the party division, the fact that KPV LV parliament leader was involved in a scandal which seemed to implicate him in corruption<sup>69</sup> was reflected in the polls.

The National Alliance, by contrast, did well in the May EP election, coming in third with a result of 16%. Part of the good result for the nationalist-populist party was due to the person of Roberts Zile, who has been a member of the European Parliament ever since Latvia's EU accession in 2004 and has emerged as one of the key figures in the European Conservatives and Reformists EP group. Thus, in the EU election campaign, Zile and New Unity's candidate Valdis Dombrovskis, a former and current European Commissioner well respected in the country in terms of their experience, positively impacted their respective party lists.

But during the second half of the year several scandals engulfed the National Alliance, primarily because of the party's ties to the extremist scene. In November, for example, a team of investigative reporters revealed that Raivis Zeltīts, the party's secretary-general, to be an active user of a neo-Nazi website that propagates white supremacy.<sup>70</sup> A few days later it was also revealed that in 2015 a member of a British Nazi organisation – which is on the terrorist watchlist in the United Kingdom – had personally visited one of the party offices. In addition to this, it also turned out that the party has close ties to extremist groups in Ukraine.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Anon, 2019. Troubles continue in Latvian anti-establishment party KPV LV. Baltic News Network - News from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia. Available at: <https://bnn-news.com/troubles-continue-in-latvian-anti-establishment-party-kpv-lv-197023/>.

<sup>69</sup> Anon, 2019. Latvia's corruption watchdog accuses KPV LV member of fraud; politician denies guilt. Baltic News Network - News from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia. Available at: <https://bnn-news.com/latvia-s-corruption-watchdog-accuses-kpv-lv-member-of-fraud-politician-denies-guilt-199469/>.

<sup>70</sup> Eng.lsm.lv, 2019. Senior National Alliance figure apologises for "cloud" of far-right messages. / Article / Eng.lsm.lv. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/senior-national-alliance-figure-apologises-for-cloud-of-far-right-messages.a338044/>.

<sup>71</sup> Eng.lsm.lv, 2019. Re:Baltica reveals more questionable links of Latvian nationalists. / Article / Eng.lsm.lv. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/rebaltica-reveals-more-questionable-links-of-latvian-nationalists.a3419117/>.

Ultimately, these events only had a small impact on the popular support of the National Alliance in the second half of 2019.

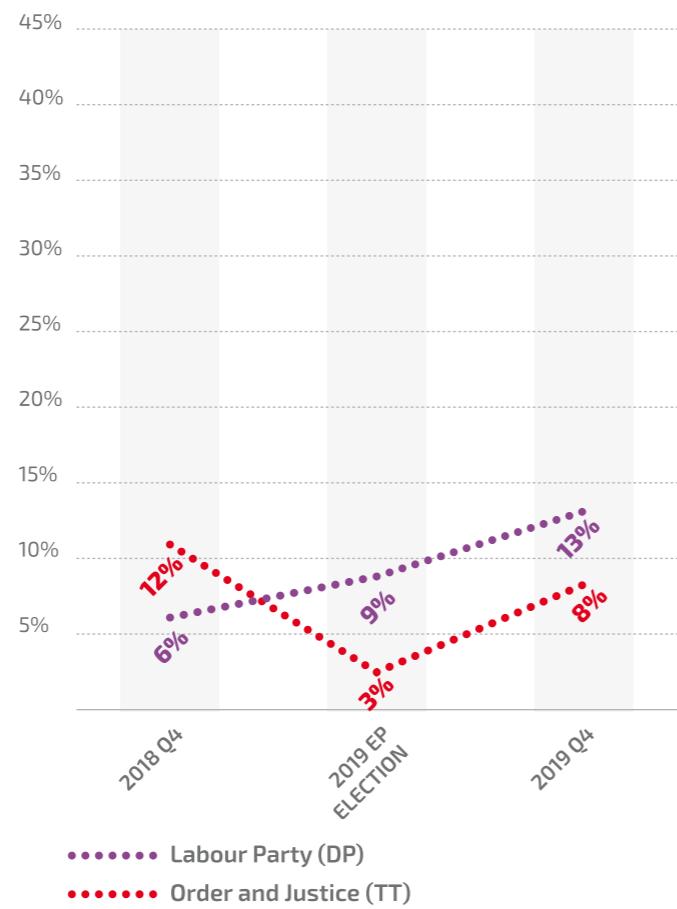
For the time being, there seems to be little chance of the KPV LV's polls to be back up in 2020 because the party seems to be too torn and plagued by the many scandals surrounding it.



# Lithuania

After an initial decline in the first half of 2019, the support for populist parties in Lithuania began to rise in the second half of the year. While at the end of 2018 only 18% of the voters would have opted for one of the two populist parties, the right-wing Order and Justice (Tvarka ir Teisingumas - TT) and the left-wing Labour Party (Darbo Partija – DP), in December 2019 this ratio had slightly risen to 21%. The EP election in May, however, marked a low point for the populist parties as their joint score was only 12%.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN LITHUANIA



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Labour Party (DP)	Renew	6%	9%
Order and Justice (TT)	-	12%	3%

In Lithuania, the second round of the presidential election was scheduled to coincide with the election to the European Parliament on 26 May. As a result, domestic issues were dominating the public agenda above European ones. And in the absence of a substantial European campaign, both the EP election and presidential election were seen as a referendum on the government.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Jastramskis, M., 2019. Lithuania: Defeat of Eurosceptic Parties in the Shadow of Presidential Campaign. CISE. Available at: <https://cise.luisi.it/cise/2019/05/28/lithuania-defeat-of-eurosceptic-parties-in-the-shadow-of-presidential-campaign/>.

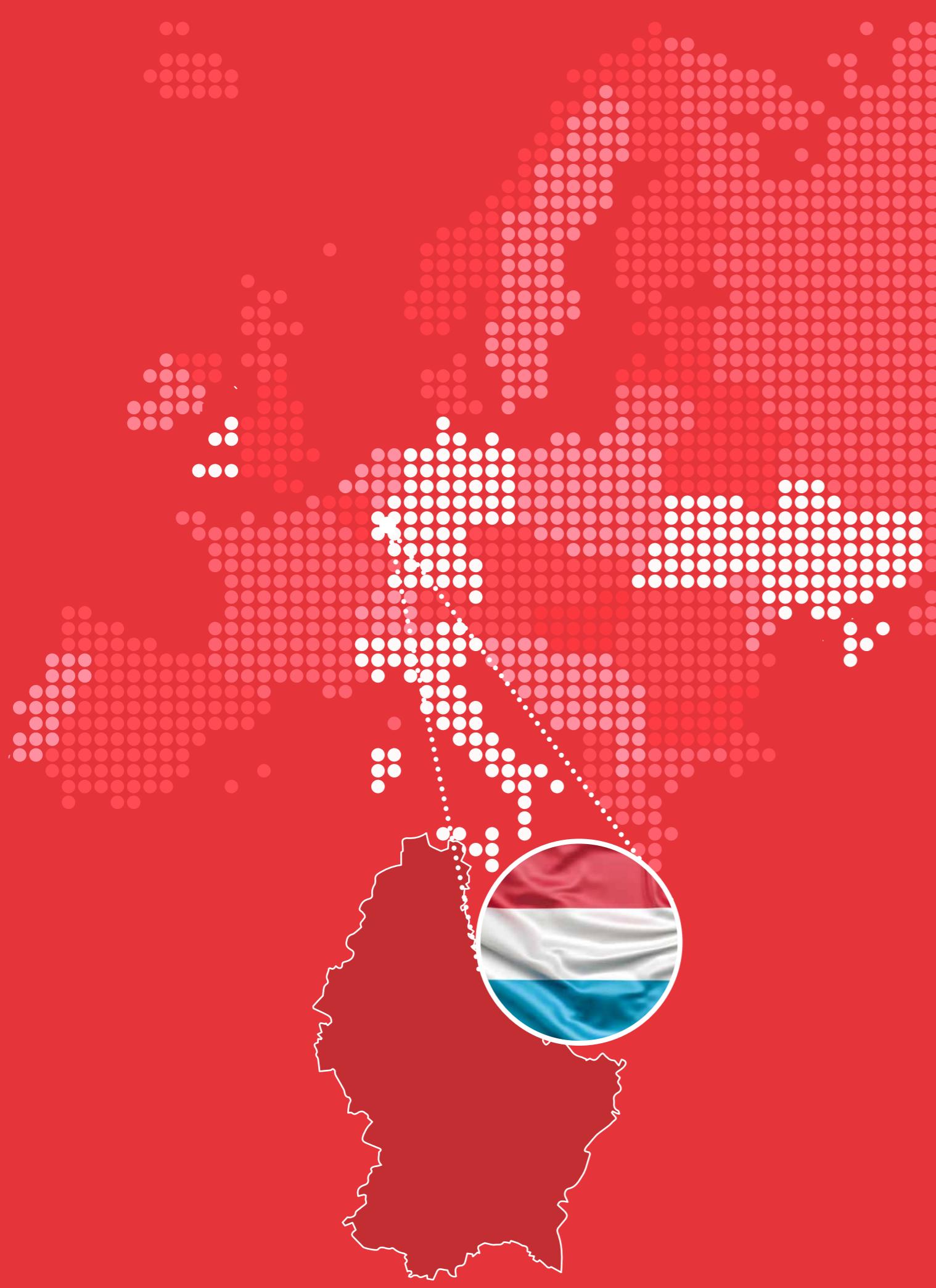
As a result, Order and Justice (TT), which is formally in opposition, had a weak result in the EP election. While in 2014 the party had run on an anti-Euro campaign winning 14.25% of the votes, five years later it had dropped 11 points, scoring 2.7%. An additional explanation of the weak performance of TT in the 2019 EU elections was that a prominent ex-party member, the former president Rolandas Paksas, ran on a separate list and drew 4% of the votes.

The EP election was won by Homeland Union, which integrates the European People's Party group in the EP, while the social democratic LSDP came in second. The populist left-wing Labour Party (DP), which despite its name and ideological outlook is a member of the liberal Renew Europe group, came in fourth with 9% of the votes. Previously, the party had failed to clear the parliamentary threshold of 5% in 2016, although they nevertheless had won two constituency seats and thus representation in the national parliament.

But the presidential election – which resulted in the election of Gitanas Nausėda as Lithuania's president with two-thirds of the votes cast – proved to be another win for Order and Justice. During the presidential election campaign the mainstream parties repeatedly said that they may conclude a new coalition agreement if the outcome of the presidential election suggested that a new coalition may be called for. And that did indeed turn out to be the case. Ultimately, as part of the new arrangement after the presidential election, Order and Justice and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania–Christian Families Alliance, which had previously supported the government from the outside, formally joined the coalition.<sup>73</sup> The coalition government did not prove long-lived, however, since by early autumn everyone but the faction leader had quit the TT's group in parliament following an internal conflict and a loss of confidence in the faction leader. The dissidents set up a new parliamentary group called For Lithuania's Welfare. Since one of the preconditions for being part of the government was that the party had to possess a faction in parliament, the governing coalition continued without the formal involvement of the remaining TT members of parliament, who continued to provide outside support to the government, however.

One institutional development also gave the two Lithuanian populist parties a fleeting cause for celebration was that the Lithuanian parliament reduced the threshold for parties from 5% to 4%, while for party alliances it was lowered from 7% to 5%.<sup>74</sup> Since the support of these parties tends to fluctuate, a lower threshold would have made the likelihood of them winning representation in the next parliament more likely. A few days later, however,

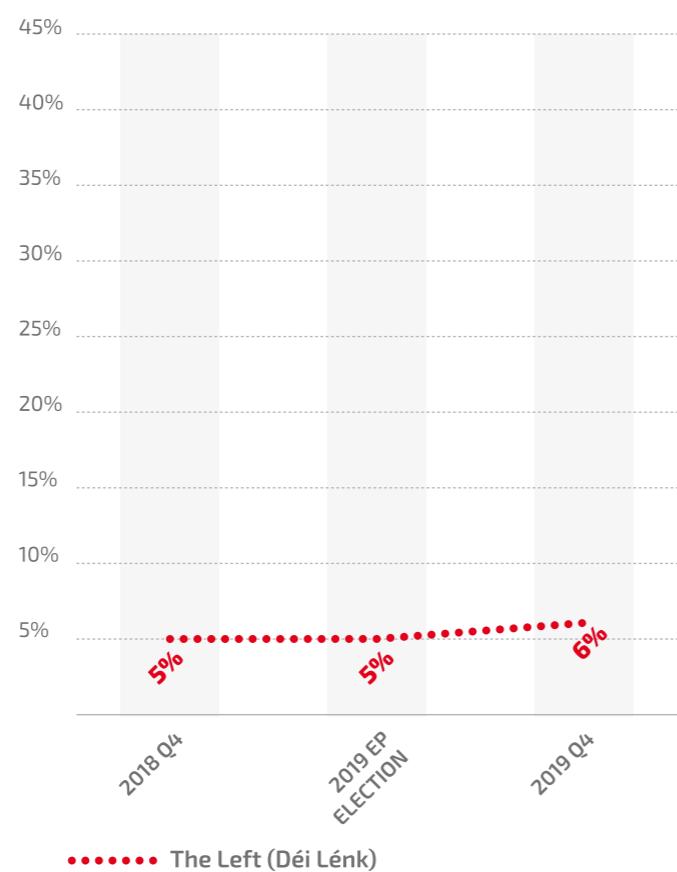
the president refused to sign the law, arguing that it would lead to a more fragmented parliament.<sup>75</sup> This means that the election in 2020 will have to be held on the basis of the existing rules. Nevertheless, while a lot may happen until autumn 2020, at the end of 2019 neither populist party seemed to be in grave danger of dropping below the threshold: The Labour Party was supported by 13% of the voters, while Order and Justice stood at 8% in the polls.



# Luxembourg

Populist politics does not have a strong position in Luxembourg. The country's only anti-establishment party, The Left (Déi Lénk), has consistently enjoyed the support of 5% of the voters. The climate crisis has emerged as one of the vital political issues in 2019 but Déi Lénk failed to increase its support even though it pivoted decisively towards a more rigorous representation of green issues.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN LUXEMBOURG



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
The Left (Déi Lénk)	-	5%	6%

In 2019, the populist left-wing Déi Lénk primarily focused on a policy turn towards green issues. In the party's platform for the elections to the European Parliament, which was adopted in March, they enshrined ecological sustainability as a flagship issue, alongside their traditional focus on social justice. The shift was also apparent in the fact that unlike in their manifesto for the parliamentary election in 2018, ecology was the top issue in their 2019 EP election programme. Nevertheless, their EP manifesto entitled "Our Life – Not Their Profit" also continues to feature traditional issues for Déi Lénk, such as the fight against the tax evasion of multinational corporations and Brussels lobbyists.

Déi Lénk's pivot towards green issues is also a reaction to the breakthrough in 2018 of The

Greens (Déi Gréng) in Luxembourg. The Greens received 15% of the votes in that election, primarily by appealing to an issue that young voters are concerned with.<sup>76</sup> Déi Lénk, which only received 5% in the same election, has since been calling for decisive measures to avert a climate disaster and it has been attacking the incumbent government – which includes The Greens – with reference to environmental issues, arguing that it is not active enough on this front. Thus, during the EP campaign Déi Lénk proposed to introduce substantial traffic restrictions in the capital<sup>77</sup> and it to set aside

<sup>76</sup> This is also in line with the findings of the Millennial Dialogue on Europe, see here: [https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/millennial%20dialogue%20report\\_for%20web\\_v21.pdf](https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/millennial%20dialogue%20report_for%20web_v21.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> Parachini, A., 2019. Place de la Constitution piétonne: déi Lénk Stad veut aller plus loin. Le Quotidien. Available at: <https://www.lequotidien.lu/luxembourg/place-de-la-constitution-pietonne-dei-lenk-stad-veut-aller-plus-loin/>.

additional areas exclusively for pedestrians than The Greens.<sup>78</sup>

Déi Lénk initiated a debate in parliament on the climate crisis, calling on the legislature to officially proclaim a climate emergency<sup>79</sup> and they also sought to put the housing as a topical issue on the public agenda. Among other actions relating to the latter, it proposed legislation<sup>80</sup> that would provide renters with protections in a real estate market in which prices had been rising rapidly. It primarily sought to ameliorate the situation of renters by increasing the quantity of public rentals, as well as by implementing limits on rental fees to forestall the drastic rent increases fuelled by real estate speculation.

An interesting aspect of Déi Lénk's fight against multinational corporations was a refusal by the nation's leading television channel RTL – a major multinational corporation – to broadcast the party's television ad, arguing that it had been recorded in French rather than Luxembourgish. The party's leaders responded by calling for a boycott of RTL, arguing that the channel had violated the law on free language use.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, the party secured 4.8% of the votes in the EP election, almost the same result as in the 2018 vote, which means that the focus on green issues failed to increase the party's popularity. At the same time, the Greens improved their previous results and surged to 19%.

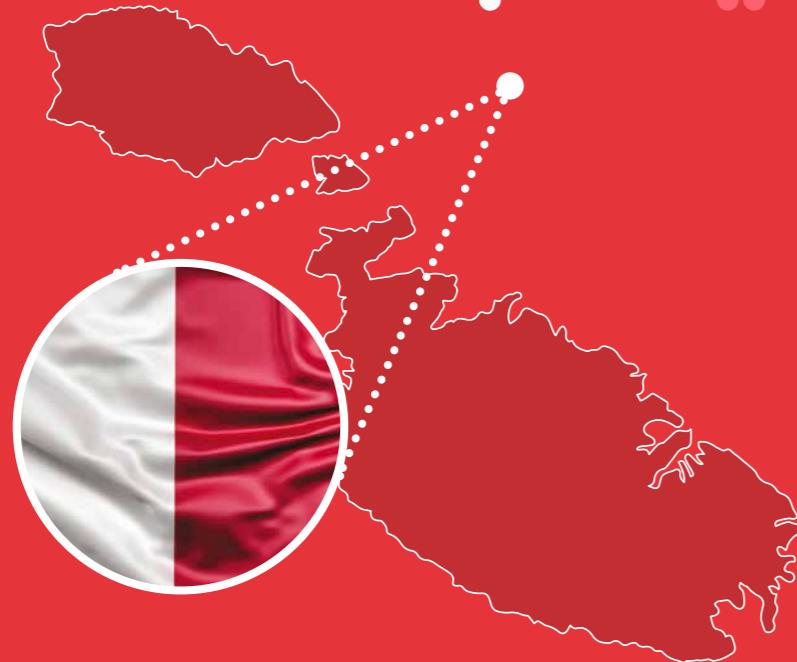
The most important issue for Déi Lénk in 2020 will be whether they will stick with their new emphasis on environmental issues and whether they can use their position in opposition to compel the government to take more drastic action on the environment, or whether the left-wing populist party will instead choose to focus on its original agenda and devote its energy to progress on social justice issues.

<sup>78</sup> Parachini, A., 2019. Fonds de compensation: déi Lénk dresse un constat "accablant". Le Quotidien. Available at: <https://www.lequotidien.lu/politique-societe/fonds-de-compensation-dei-lenk-dresse-un-constat-accablant/>.

<sup>79</sup> Anon, Environment: Climate emergency protest takes place outside Chamber of Deputies. RTL Today - Environment. Available at: <https://today rtl lu/news/luxembourg/a/1348782.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Anon, 2019. Left demands legislation to address housing crisis in Luxembourg. Peoples Dispatch. Available at: <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2019/09/13/left-demands-legislation-to-address-housing-crisis-in-luxembourg/>.

<sup>81</sup> Parachini, A., 2019. Polémique avec RTL sur les spots électoraux: déi Lénk réplique. Le Quotidien. Available at: <https://www.lequotidien.lu/politique-societe/polemique-avec-rtl-sur-les-spots-electoraux-dei-lenk-replique/>.



# Malta

Just as in previous years, there was still no major populist party in Malta in 2019. Mainstream and pro-European parties continue to dominate the politics of the country, while extremist formations enjoy only marginal support in the polls. Nevertheless, a serious crisis erupted in Malta in 2019, and as a result the prime minister was ousted, while the European Parliament began investigating the country in connection with problems pertaining to the rule of law and the state of public affairs in Malta.

During the first half of the year the elections for the European Parliament and the municipal elections held at the same time dominated the public discourse in Malta. The centre-left Labour Party (PL), which has been governing Malta since 2013, went into the election confidently, with a 20-point lead. In the months leading up to the election, PL's support oscillated in the narrow range between 55-62%, while its main rival, the Nationalist Party (PN), never once managed to poll above 40% during the period investigated. These two parties have traditionally dominated Maltese politics, while the various smaller formations are typically supported by anywhere between 0% and 3% of the electorate. European issues were relegated to the background in the campaign,<sup>82</sup> with the governing party brandishing its achievements over the past years and the Nationalist Party attacking Labour by arguing that as a member of the Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament (S&D Group) it would at some point seek to legalise abortion, which remains illegal and deeply unpopular in Malta.

The election turned out more or less as had been predicted by the polls, although Labour underperformed slightly as compared to expectations. Nevertheless, it still won an outsize victory that made it the party with the highest level of public support in the EU. Its 54% result was enough for four seats in the EP, while the PN's 38% secured it two seats in Strasbourg. In 2014, both parties had received three seats each. It is also worth mentioning that the far-right xenophobic Imperium Europe formation did slightly better than expected, but that still only meant that it was supported by 3% of the voters.

Despite the government's overwhelming popularity, it became subject to ever-increasing pressure in connection with the murder of the investigative reporter Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017. There were growing anti-government protests in the Maltese capital Valletta as the investigations led ever higher, reaching the top echelons of politics and implicating several ministers, oligarchs, and even the prime minister's chief of staff, who was interrogated by the police as a suspect. Finally, the Maltese prime minister Joseph Muscat tendered his resignation on 1 December 2019.

Yet, much to the chagrin of the European Parliament,

despite his resignation Muscat was allowed to stay on as a caretaker until mid-January 2020. The EP dispatched a delegation to Malta because they were concerned that Muscat might unduly influence the course of the investigation. In response, the EP initiated a rule-of-law dialogue with the European Commission, which is one of the first steps in the Article 7 procedure that has already been launched against the Hungarian and Polish governments. Finally, Muscat departed his office on 12 January 2020, and his fellow PL member Robert Abela took over the reins of the government. Going forward, the question is how much manoeuvring room the new prime minister will have amidst the massive crisis of confidence in Malta.

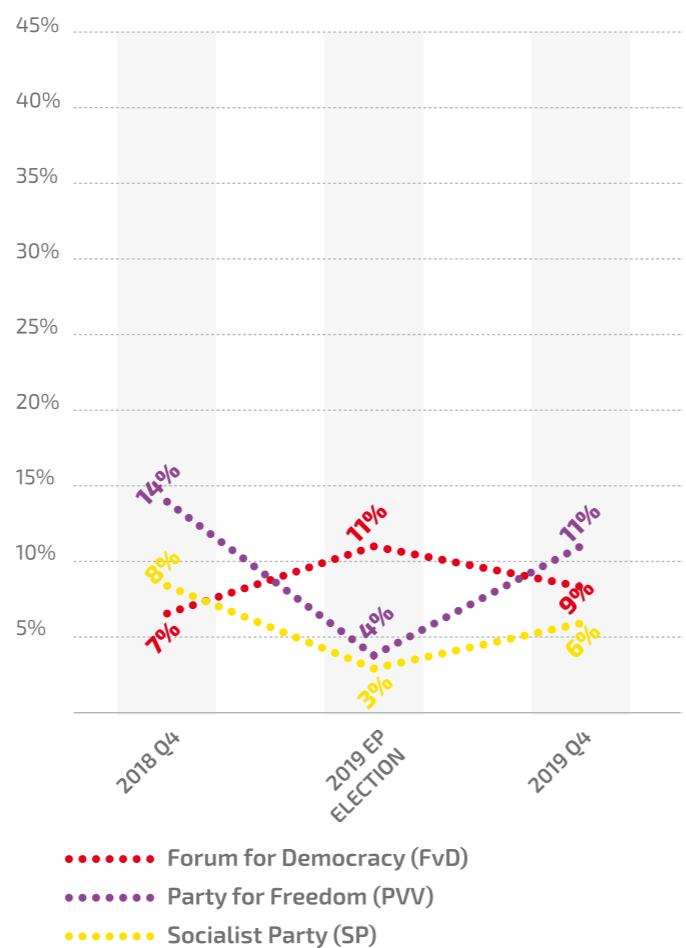
<sup>82</sup> Carammia, M., & Pace, R., 2019. Malta: Unstoppable Labour? CISE. Available at: <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2019/05/31/malta-unstoppable-labour/>.



# • The Netherlands

Right-wing populism in the Netherlands has not surged in 2019. The country's two leading right-wing populist parties ended the year with 21%, the same level they secured in 2018. Throughout the year, however, there were substantive fluctuations in their aggregate polling and election results., 2019 also saw huge shifts in support between these two right-wing populist parties, the Party for Freedom (PvV) led by the "established" figure of Dutch populist politics, Geert Wilders, and the Forum for Democracy (FvD), led by a self-declared intellectual, Thierry Baudet. Along with a stagnating left-wing populist Socialist Party, populists have the support of every fourth vote in the Netherlands.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN THE NETHERLANDS



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Forum for Democracy (FvD)	ECR	7%	11%
Party for Freedom (PVV)	ID	14%	4%
Socialist Party (SP)	-	8%	3%

At the end of 2019, PVV polled at 11% while FvD stood at 9%. Thus, every fifth Dutch voter supported right-wing populist parties. This is sizeable increase over their combined support of the 2017 election when the PVV received 13.1% (securing second place in the deeply fragmented Dutch party landscape), while the newly established FvD won a mere 1.8%.

Both parties have experienced a fluctuating but steady rise since the last election, culminating in a peak at the end of April 2019 when together they polled around 27% and then – after a drop to 14.5% in the EP election a few weeks later – they stabilised around 20% for most of the remainder of the year. At the same time, behind the same overall figure there was a massive shift within the right-

wing populists. Even while their overall support was stable, many voters shifted their support frequently between them.

In the two 2019 elections, the municipal elections in March and the EP election two months later, it was the youngest right-wing populist party, the Forum for Democracy, that saw a breakthrough. FvD received the most votes of all parties in the municipal elections (with a vote share of 14.5%), thereby increasing its presence in regional assemblies and the Dutch upper house, the Senate, which is elected by the regional assemblies.<sup>83</sup> Tied with the governing centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of Prime Minister Mark Rutte (which received slightly fewer votes than the FvD in total, 15.11% to the right-wing populist party's 15.87%), the Forum secured the largest faction in the Senate, holding 12 of the 75 seats. In the meanwhile, the governing coalition made up of three centre-right (VVD, CDA and CU) parties and a centre-left party (D66) lost its majority in the Senate due to the success of the FvD.

Although part of the gains by the right-wing populists in March 2019 came at the expense of the PVV, which lost 4 seats, in general right-wing populists increased their levels of support in the Netherlands. The right-wing populist breakthrough was likely connected to a shooting incident in the city of Utrecht, where a Turkish-born immigrant killed four people<sup>84</sup> on a tram and wounded six others,<sup>85</sup> in what was later confirmed to be a terrorist attack. FvD leader Baudet was the first to publicly condemn the government's immigration policies in connection with the attack – even while all the other parties declined to comment out of respect for the victims. Although his comments proved controversial, they enabled the party to occupy the space in the public agenda just before the election. FvD's dominance was strong in the polls at the time that Prime Minister Rutte was only willing to debate with Baudet before the election.<sup>86</sup>

In the EP election, FvD secured almost 11% as compared to PVV's 3.5%, meaning 14.5% in total for both right-wing populist parties, the EP election was thus a disappointment for them. The FvD's

11% lagged over 4 points behind the third-placed Christian Democrats (CDA), while the clear winners of the election were the Social Democrats (PvdA) led by the then First Vice President of the European Commission and centre-left Spitzenkandidat to lead the new commission, Frans Timmermans. They were followed by the main governing party, the VVD.

Currently, PvV and FvD are close in terms of their standing in the polls. The right-wing populists are preferred by roughly every fifth Dutch voter, which is a relatively high level of support in Western European comparison, positioning the Netherlands with higher levels of right-wing populism than any other country in the region apart from France, Finland, Sweden and the Flemish region of Belgium. However, the Netherlands is also special in that it is the only country where the right-wing populist scene is divided into two large players of roughly the same size. Thus far, the race between the two distinct brand-names of right-wing populism is open.

Wilders' is a firebrand who has sought to appeal to less educated voters with openly xenophobic rhetoric. Baudet, by contrast, is more sophisticated and appears to resonate with a more upscale electorate. Baudet's swift and harsh reaction to the aforementioned attack in Utrecht, for example, upset the political consensus on abstaining from political commentary while the scale of the tragedy was being assessed and processed. Baudet's thematic focus also appears broader, emphatically pushing back against what he calls "climate hysteria" and women's rights, among other things. Both parties are staunchly anti-EU and they are both solidly pro-Putin, with FvD especially as it successfully pushed for a referendum and mobilised voters against the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine.<sup>87</sup> At the time, the agreement in question was supposed to boost the latter country in its path towards Western integration and highlight its struggle against the Russian invasion into its territory, so it was both of symbolic and material importance FvD's move.

While the right-wing populism has made substantial gains in the Netherlands during the last year, the left-wing populists have lost some support. The Socialist Party (SP) stood at 8% at the end of 2018 but by the time of the local election in April the

<sup>83</sup> See here: <https://www.politico.eu/article/mark-rutte-to-lose-senate-majority-after-dutch-local-elections/>

<sup>84</sup> With one of the victims succumbing to their wounds later.

<sup>85</sup> See here: <https://www.politico.eu/article/police-multiple-injuries-in-shooting-in-utrecht/>

<sup>86</sup> See here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-05-25/eu-vote-thierry-baudet-of-fvd-is-new-face-of-dutch-nationalism>

<sup>87</sup> See here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-05-25/eu-vote-thierry-baudet-of-fvd-is-new-face-of-dutch-nationalism>

party had dropped to 6%, and in the EP election it performed even worse with only 3.37% (down from 9.64% in 2014), losing its two seats in the EP. Subsequently, it stabilised its position in the polls at 6%. This is a major turnaround as compared to a few years ago when the SP was in ascendance while the PvV – the only relevant right-wing populist party at the time – seemed to be waning.<sup>88</sup> The SP's weakness owes in part to the success of the social democratic PvDA, whose nominee to lead the next European Commission, Frans Timmermans, proved popular with the Dutch electorate, giving the PvDA a win in the EP election. Nevertheless, despite the relative weakness of the SP now, if one adds their 6% support to the 21% who would currently opt for a right-wing populist party, then over a quarter of the Dutch electorate prefers a populist party, which in turn, suggests a high level of dissatisfaction with traditional politics.

Given that the next election will not be until March 2021, 2020 will give the centrist government around Prime Minister Rutte the time to ascertain how coalition parties could expand their support, while populists, in turn, will try to sort out whether one of them can decisively pull ahead of the other. The populist breakthrough to highlight happened on the occasion of the municipal election in April 2019 even with the downturn of the EP election results. It was a clear warning to traditional politics that when it comes to domestic issues, the proportion of Dutch voters who are willing to give right-wing populist parties a chance has increased.

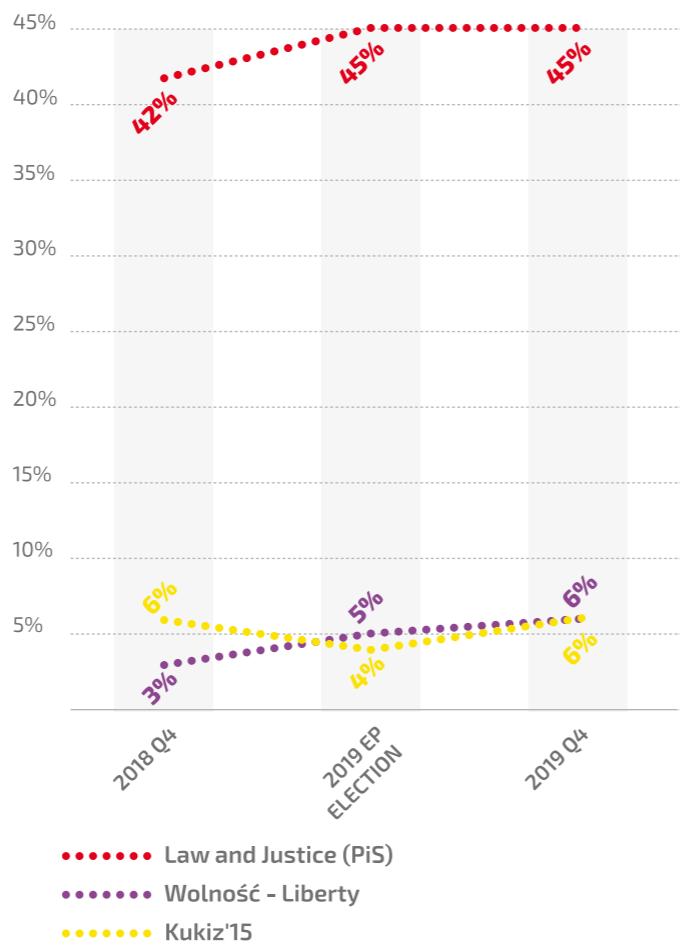
<sup>88</sup> See here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/02/netherlands-elections-socialist-party>



# Poland

Poland is one of the few member states where populists have full control of the government, and, along with Italy, it was the only large member state with such a government. With a decisive victory in both the EP and the national parliamentary elections, the incumbent right-wing populist party, Law and Justice (PiS) further entrenched its standing and power in the country, leaving little margin or possibility for any sort of opposition.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN POLAND



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Kukiz'15	-	6%	4%
Law and Justice (PiS)	ECR	42%	45%
Wolność - Liberty	-	3%	5%

Even though there was a period during PiS's four-year term when the race tightened, notably in 2017 when the Civic Platform (PO), the main opposition party, saw a surge in support almost to the levels of PiS (in April 2017, at 32% PiS was only six points ahead of the Civic Platform), a year later PiS gained a significant lead over the Civic Platform once again. Going into election year, PiS maintained thus a

steady lead (ranging from a low of 11% to a high of 24 points) in the polls and its victory was no longer in doubt.

In fact, one of the most remarkable features of PiS's political performance was its extreme stability, with the party receiving between 44-46% in the polls during all quarters of 2019, as well as in the two

elections in 2019. This resulted in a victorious 45.56% result for the governing party in the EP election in May, beating the second contender, a joint opposition list (38.3%), by a margin of over 7 points.

In many respects, the success of the PiS government in Poland resembles that of the Fidesz government in Hungary, with which it has so much in common that they view themselves as ideological twins of sorts. PiS embraces a similar brand of nationalism, including the re-writing of the Polish history, a staunch rejection of refugees and an effort to control public discourse.

Yet, despite the similarities between the policies of Fidesz and PiS, there also substantial differences which can prove to be instructive to better understand Poland's leading populist party. For example, PiS, on the one hand, has not introduced a flat income (what Fidesz introduced in 2011) and, on the other hand, it has invested in some social spending policies that have benefitted poor and lower middle-classes,<sup>93</sup> which in turn have resulted in an electoral appreciation for the government's largesse.<sup>94</sup> PiS also offers a special social agenda which is based on the conservative model of family.

Ahead of the country's two elections, PiS promised to further increase public spending and invest in healthcare and even though many of its policies remain controversial (thus, for example, demonstrators clad in black have protested abortion restrictions proposed by the government<sup>95</sup>), it has not tarnished its credibility – in fact, it might even have contributed to the boosting of its electoral prospects.<sup>96</sup> After many years, PiS remains one of the strongest populist party challenging Europe because of its electoral success, its popular public policies, the size of the country it controls and of course not least its questionable policies regarding the rule-of-law, which are already being monitored through the critical lens of the European Commission's Article 7 procedure.<sup>97</sup>

Another interesting recent development in Poland's party landscape is the slight surge in the strength of the far-right Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic – Liberty and Hope (KORWiN), which is also known as Wolność – Liberty. The party failed to clear the electoral threshold in 2015 (only 4.76%) and was not able to send any representatives to the Polish parliament, the Sejm. It was floundering in the polls as recently as early 2019 (with just around 1%) and then gradually the party gained support over the course of the year, winning 6.8% in the national election of October and ending the year with 6% in support.

It is important to keep in mind that PiS strategy in recent years was to consolidate right-wing support and crowd out rivals on the right, KORWiN included. PiS success in recent years can be explained to some extent, on its extreme shift to the right, fuelled by the government's own reactionary rhetoric, including attacks on gays, which are giving the issues raised by the more extreme elements on the far-right of the Polish political spectrum more attention.<sup>98</sup> KORWiN can even be useful for PiS as the existence of a party further to the right makes the politics of PiS more acceptable. What distinguished PiS, the governing party, from its even more extremist competitors is its sceptical and occasionally even hostile stance towards Russia. Whereas its extremist challengers are pro-Russian or even influenced by the Putin administration in Moscow,<sup>99</sup> which has been known to extend financial support to political forces in Europe that push for a more Putin-friendly attitude in their countries and the European Union.

Another eccentric player among the Polish populists, the struggling Kukiz'15 party founded by the rock musician Paweł Kukiz, managed to ride the country's nationalist-populist wave into parliament in 2015. Since then, the party has distanced itself from its affiliation with extreme nationalism and although it remains an anti-establishment party. In October 2019, Kukiz'15 won 6 seats in the Sejm by joining forces with the centre-right Polish People's Party (PSL). Although the Polish Coalition formed by the two parties Kukiz'15 and PSL remains above the parliamentary threshold in the polls, Kukiz is no longer a separate entity in the polls, which means we can no longer capture its level of support.

<sup>93</sup> See here: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/02/devil-in-the-details/>

<sup>94</sup> See here: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2019/1011/Why-Poland-s-illiberal-ruling-party-is-cruising-toward-re-election>

<sup>95</sup> See here: <https://www.fes-connect.org/reading-picks/the-black-protests-have-changed-poland/>

<sup>96</sup> See here: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/09/28/polands-ruling-pis-vows-to-boost-public-healthcare-ahead-of-vote>

<sup>97</sup> See here: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_17\\_5367](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_5367)

<sup>98</sup> See here: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/31/polish-far-right-emboldened/>

<sup>99</sup> See here: <https://visegradiinsight.eu/the-kremlins-influence-reaches-warsaw/>



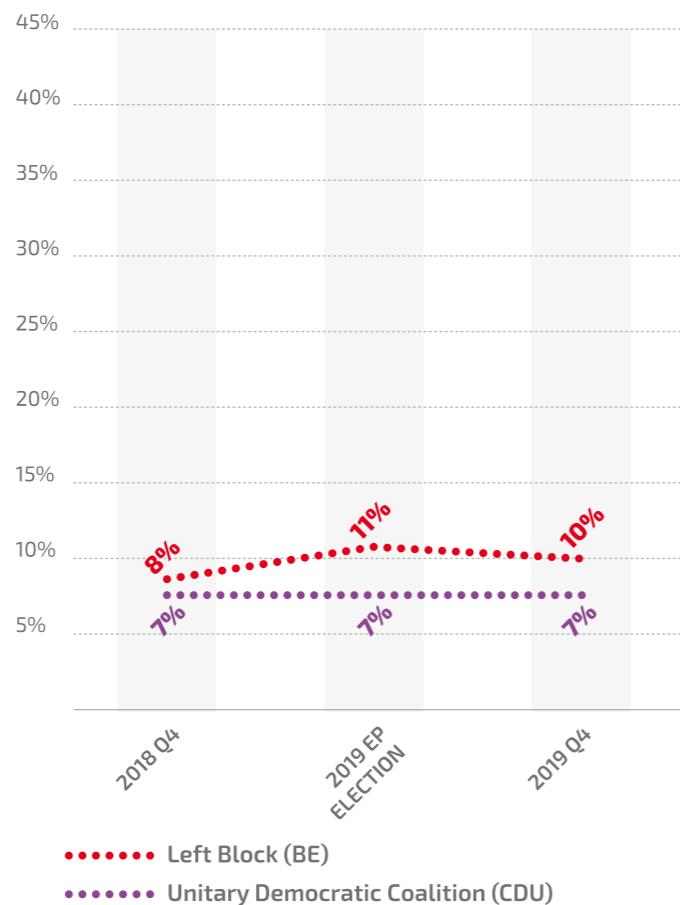
# Portugal

The support of populist parties in Portugal has been stagnating for years now, and that did not change significantly in 2019. Both left-wing anti-elite formations, the Left Bloc (BE) and the Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU)<sup>96</sup>, were supported by 7-10% of voters, respectively, in 2019. But there are also some ominous signs on the right-wing populist side of the political spectrum: Although nationalist voices are still not major players in Portugal, 2019 marked the first time in the history of Portuguese democracy that a right-wing populist party (CHEGA<sup>97</sup>) gained representation in parliament.

<sup>96</sup> The Unitary Democratic Coalition is a political coalition of the left-wing populist Portuguese Communist party and the non-populist Ecologist Party.

<sup>97</sup> The right-wing populist CHEGA is excluded from this book as the party received only 1.5% in the EP election and never went above 3% of the polls.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN PORTUGAL



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
<b>Left Block (BE)</b>	GUE/NGL	8%	11%
<b>Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU)</b>	GUE/NGL	7%	7%

In 2019, the most important political event in Portugal was without a doubt the election victory of the Socialist Party (PS) in October with the result of 36%.<sup>98</sup> Despite its electoral success, the government led by Prime Minister António Costa, which first entered into office in 2015, did not secure a majority in the legislature. Unlike in the previous term, however, the Socialists did not enter into a formal agreement with the two left-wing populist formations, the Left Bloc and the Unitary Democratic Coalition (the political coalition of the

Portuguese Communist Party and the Ecologist Party, "The Greens"). Instead, the centre-left government decided to secure the majorities it needs to govern based on ad hoc agreements.

In exchange for the support, the two left-wing populist parties have been pressuring the centre-left governing party to pursue more decidedly anti-austerity policies, which occasionally led to major frictions between the parties. Both populist parties regularly criticised the minister of finance, Mário Centeno, who is also president of the Eurogroup, which comprises the EU Member States that are

part of the Eurozone. The far-left parties argued that Centeno had placed too much emphasis on fiscal rigour despite the fact that the country has finally overcome the crisis. The tension between the government and the far-left escalated ahead of the European elections in May 2019 when the BE and the CDU sought to join forces with the conservative opposition (CDS-PP) to retroactively increase the pay of teachers that had been frozen since the country's economic crisis. Prime Minister Costa threatened to resign at that point<sup>99</sup> but as the CDS-PP ultimately recoiled, the issue of the teacher's retroactive pay hike taken off the parliamentary agenda.

The governing Socialist Party ended up winning the EP elections decisively with 33% of the votes (up from 31% in 2014).<sup>100</sup> With 10% of the votes (5% in 2014), the Left Bloc managed to add another MEP to its delegation in Brussels, in contrast to the CDU, which lost one of its two seats with a result of 7% (previously 13%). To put the Left Bloc's results in a broader context, it is worth noting that there were only two left-wing populist parties across the entire European Union (the other being La France Insoumise) which managed to increase the number of their seats as compared to 2014 EP elections.

In light of the EP election results, the biggest question in the run-up to the general election in October 2019 was whether the governing Socialist Party would be able to pull off a majority of its own or whether the so-called Geringonça<sup>101</sup> constellation would have to continue to ensure a governing majority in parliament. The Left Bloc was outspoken about its objective to avert a parliamentary majority for the PS, while the CDU was more reserved in its campaign. But the two smaller parties were not only fighting the establishment; they also faced off against two other minor parties, the People-Animals-Nature (PAN) and LIVRE, both of which saw their support rise. PAN is a radical animal protection and environmentalist party and it successfully exploited the *zeitgeist* that had emerged surrounding the climate crisis. Its 3.3% result marked an increase of 1.9 points over its 2014 EP showing. To compare, the alliance of communists and greens (CDU) received precisely 1.9 percentage points less than four years ago. A new party led by the Portuguese

politician Rui Tavares, LIVRE – which had seceded from the Left Bloc – also managed to increase its support and their parliamentary delegation was the first in the Portuguese parliament to include an MP of African descent.

The mystery of how Portugal has thus far managed to avoid the rise of the far-right is generally explained with the theory that the authoritarian New State (Estado Novo) regime, which was overthrown by the Carnation Revolution in 1974, is still very vivid in the collective memory of the Portuguese society. At the same time, it is also important to stress that the left-wing parties in the country have managed to nurture and retain their close ties with the working class, and hence, unlike in other European countries, the far-right has not made any significant headway in securing political support among this segment of the population.<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, 2019 marked the first time in the history of Portuguese democracy that a racist and anti-Roma formation, the CHEGA, managed to gain representation in parliament. The party is led by André Ventura, a 36-year-old law professor, who is primarily renowned for the drastic criminal law policies he endorses, as well as his fight against what he refers to as cultural Marxism and political correctness. CHEGA's 1.3% tally is remarkable considering that the party had been founded merely six months before the election. Even though at the end of 2019 CHEGA was still not strong in the polls, it has a decent shot at increasing its support in the future due to the heightened media attention surrounding the party and the increased funding stemming from its representation in parliament.<sup>103</sup>

The CDU consistently polled at 7% throughout the year, while by the end of the year the Left Bloc had managed to consolidate its support at the 10-percent-level it had achieved in the last election. If, however, the relationship between the governing party and the far-left parties supporting it from the outside deteriorates further, then that could well fuel the rise of the populist right in Portugal.

<sup>98</sup> See here: <https://www.dn.pt/legislativas-2019/resultados.html> + <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/legislativas2019/>

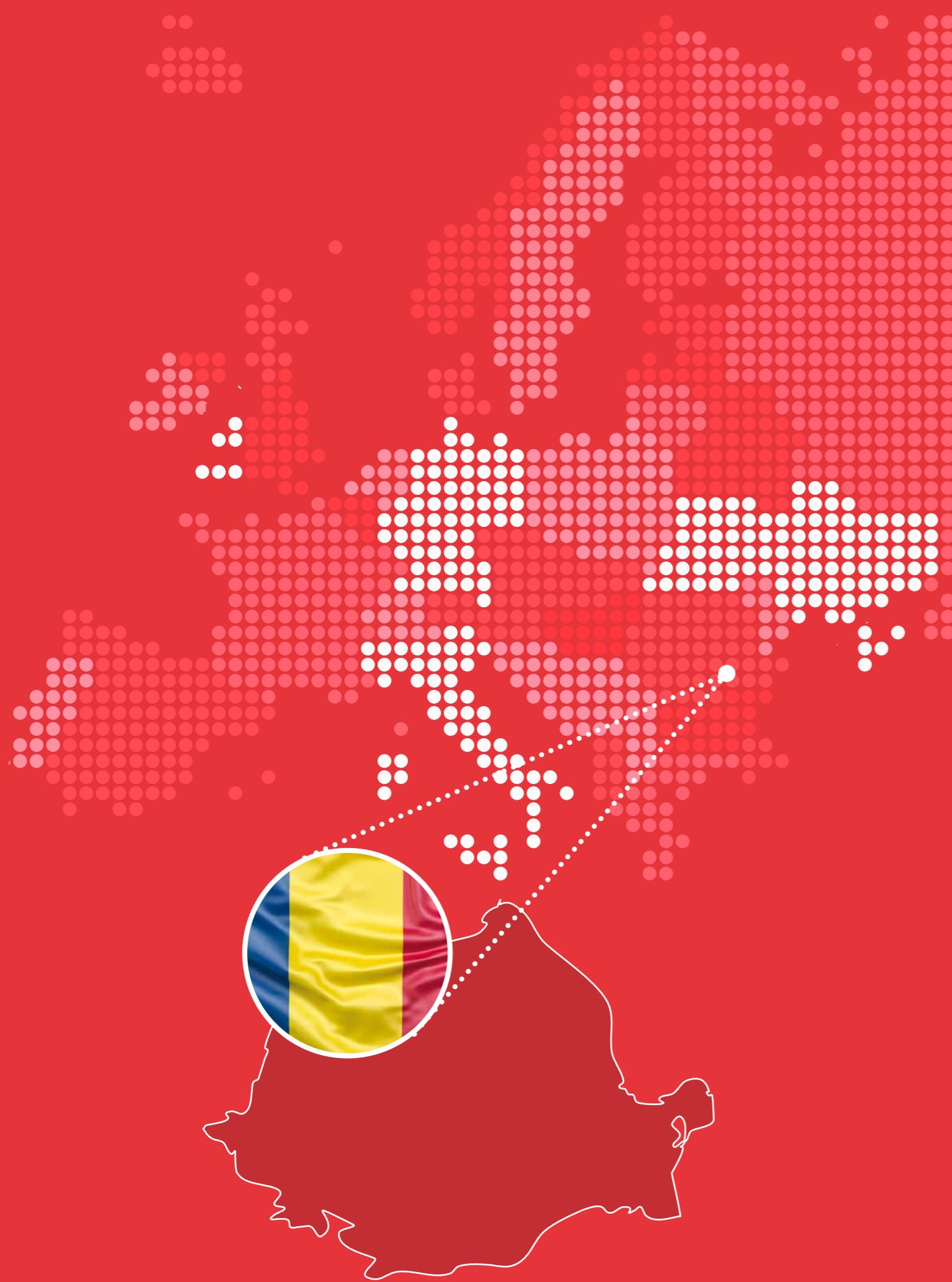
<sup>99</sup> France 24, 2019. Portugal PM pressures opposition with threat to resign. France 24. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20190504-portugal-pmpressures-opposition-with-threat-resign>.

<sup>100</sup> See here: <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/europeias2019/resultados-globais.html>

<sup>101</sup> See here: [https://www.feps-europe.eu/Assets/Publications/PostFiles/512\\_1.pdf](https://www.feps-europe.eu/Assets/Publications/PostFiles/512_1.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> Bevins, V., 2019. Where Progressives Are Winning. The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/10/portugal-election-progressives-left-winning/599518/>.

<sup>103</sup> Kern, S., 2019. Europe's Populist Wave Reaches Portugal. Gatestone Institute. Available at: <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/15053/portugal-populists-chega>.



# Romania

Apart from Malta, Romania is the only other EU Member State in which there is no populist party with a significant level of public support. Nevertheless, even without major populist parties, 2019 was a very busy year in Romanian politics. The EP elections in May substantially reshuffled the balance of power in domestic politics and in October the Romanian government fell, with the result that the largest opposition party took power. Not everything went topsy-turvy in Romanian politics, however, as in November voters re-elected the incumbent president Klaus Iohannis, who has been serving as the Romanian head of state since 2014.

The first months of 2019 were primarily shaped by the rising – and longstanding – tension between the then governing Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) of President Iohannis. Iohannis argued that the PSD-led government was closing ranks around its corrupt politicians and shielded from investigation by transgressing against the rule of law and democratic norms. The president scheduled a referendum for the date of the EP election, and the campaign period was dominated by the issues of corruption and law enforcement. Ultimately, the vote resulted in one of the worst defeats that the PSD has ever suffered; it was not enough that the anti-government stance prevailed overwhelmingly on both referenda questions, but in the EP ballot, too, the PSD dropped to a mere 23%. Moreover, it suffered these stinging defeats against the backdrop of a record turnout, which additionally highlighted just how much the governing party's popularity had waned.

And if this was not enough, a day after the election the PSD chair Liviu Dragnea was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for corruption, and he was ordered to begin serving his sentence immediately. With 27% of the votes, the winner of the election was the centre-right PNL, which is affiliated with the People's Party in the EP, while the liberal 2020 USR-PLUS Alliance garnered 22%, and the other liberal party, ALDE, which was in a coalition with the socialists at the time, failed to clear the electoral threshold and received only 4%.

But the string of bad news for the PSD did not end in May. After ALDE quit the coalition in August, the government descended into crisis. At the same time, the European Union was exerting increasing pressure on Bucharest in connection with concerns about the state of the rule of law in Romania. The European Commission has threatened Romania with launching an Article 7 procedure on several occasions. Ordinarily, the government's loss of its majority in parliament should obviously have led to early elections, but due to constitutional constraints, these could only have been scheduled for 2020.

Finally, in October the opposition managed to oust the government led by Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă by calling for a vote of no confidence. Then, in November, the PNL politician Ludovic Orban was called on to form a government and he compiled a cabinet made up of only fellow PNL members and independent experts. Former PM Viorica Dăncilă still had a major challenge ahead of her, however, as the

PSD nominated her to run against the incumbent President Klaus Iohannis in the presidential election. Ultimately, the presidential election did not result in an upset, and the crisis-stricken PSD's candidate received only a third of the votes in the run-off, which marked the worst result yet in a presidential election for the party. The incumbent Klaus Iohannis cruised to re-election with the support of two-thirds of Romanian voters, giving him another five-year term.

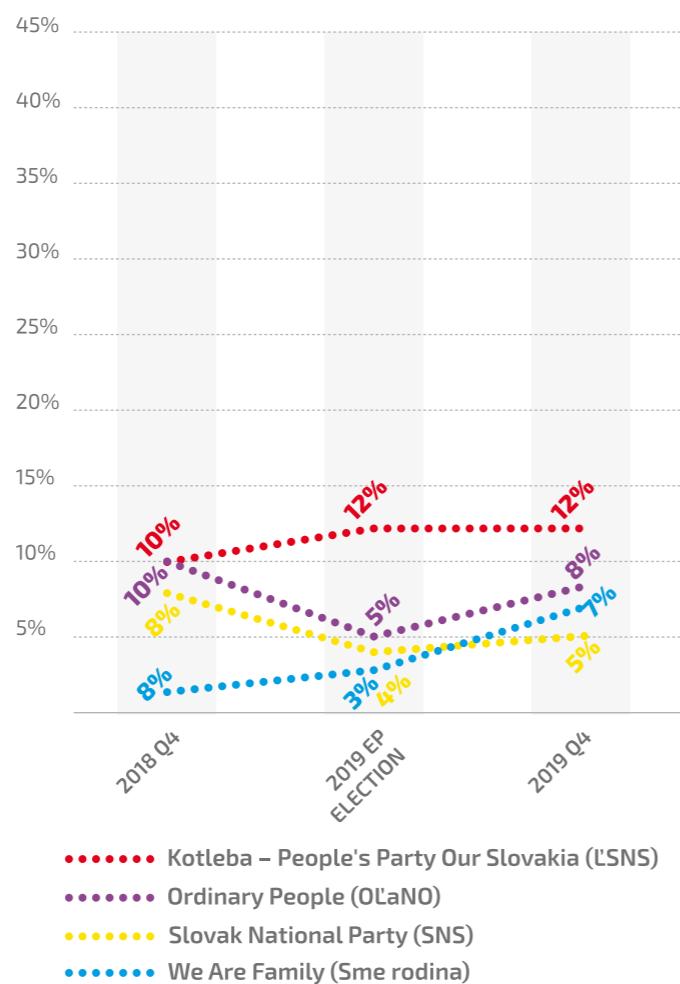
2020 is not shaping up to be a mellow year in Romania, either, since the government's control and parliamentary support do not seem rock-solid by any measure, and the underlying instability in its support will likely lead to a fair amount of problems for the cabinet in Bucharest.



# Slovakia

Slovakian politics in 2019 was in great turmoil, as the incumbent coalition government of the left-wing Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD, hereinafter Smer) party as the main force, augmented by the joint Hungarian-Slovakian party Most-Híd and the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS), was tainted by scandals that it could never really shake off. The most important question of the election campaign was whether populists could become the strongest competitors of the left-wing government.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN SLOVAKIA



succeeded Fico as prime minister while the latter held on to the chairmanship of the leading governing party, Smer.

During the election campaign in 2019, it was not clear which party would profit the most from the anti-government and anti-corruption trend in Slovakia. New, non-populist forces emerged, such as the centre-left Progressive Slovakia and the Together party (PS/SPOLU) that successfully catapulted the anti-corruption activist Zuzana Čaputová into the presidency. Also, The For the People (ZA L'UDÍ) party led by Čaputová's predecessor as president, Andrej Kiska, as well as one older party, the right-wing liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) did reasonably well in the polls.<sup>104</sup>

But the populists were nevertheless the strongest competitors of the incumbent government. For much of 2019, one of the most extreme far-right populist movements in Europe, Jan Kotleba's fascist People's Party - Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) was the strongest opposition party in the polls, though subsequently it was overtaken by the eventual winner of the election, the OL'aNO (Ordinary People in English). Both profited from the government's major missteps, and OL'aNO in particular focused much of its campaign on corruption, where the government was obviously vulnerable.

While both OL'aNO and Kotleba's party are populists, they are very different. OL'aNO, which has since emerged as the leading party in Slovakia, has an unorthodox platform that features a mix of conservative and reactionary positions. Marian Kotleba, in turn, attacks against Roma, Hungarians and Muslims. He also takes anti-European stances and showcases a positive view of Slovakia's fascist dictatorship during World War II.<sup>105</sup>

OL'aNO's surge came at the last minute, which suggests that it was not its core messaging that resonated but rather its forceful, anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetoric that made it the loudest voice for voters who decided during the last weeks of the campaign. For most of 2019, OL'aNO's polling figures (5%-8%) were actually weaker than in 2018, when its share of the projected vote was relatively stable at 10-11%. In 2019, like other populist parties in Europe, OL'aNO experienced an especially severe

setback in the EP election in May, garnering only 5% despite the fact that it stood at 8% in the polls at the time.

For Kotleba, by contrast, the situation was somewhat reversed: based on its polling it had been expected to do better, at times it was even anticipated that it might challenge Smer for the position of leading party (which Smer ultimately failed to attain, however). Nevertheless, despite polling consistently at around 12% in 2019 – and in fact even achieving that figure in the EP election in May – ultimately Kotleba's support dropped substantially and the far-right party received only 8% in the election in February 2020.

At the same time, a right-wing populist party, the We Are Family (Sme Rodina) held on to a consistently stable and moderately high support throughout 2019 and into the election of 2020, polling at 7% during most of 2018 (although dropping from a slightly higher, 10% level of support in the first quarter) and then received 8% in the national election. In the meanwhile, the most established far-right populist party in Slovakia, SNS, took a huge hit in 2020, falling well below the 5% threshold for parliament, despite the fact that it had polled above the threshold throughout most of 2019. SNS was clearly hurt by its involvement in government, which proved unpopular with the party's own base.

On the whole, therefore, while Slovakia's populist scene was mostly stable throughout 2019, but by election time in February 2020 a significant realignment had taken place, which led to a breakthrough of populist forces overall, although not all of them profited equally. The good news from the perspective of the European Union was that the most EU-sceptic and far-right forces suffered a setback, the populist wave did not benefit them. Thus, although there is a massive populist imprint on Slovakian politics now, it does not appear that their influence jeopardizes the European project at this time. Moreover, the populist parties are in a coalition with more moderate forces, so moving against the (popular) EU membership is unlikely. But with the growing influence of populism, Slovakia is nevertheless liable to become a more unpredictable partner for the EU, adding to the already growing concerns about the region.

The most dominant figure of Slovakian politics for the better part of a decade, former prime minister Robert Fico, had been forced to resign in 2018 over the assassination of an investigative reporter, Ján

Kuciak, and his fiancée. Kuciak's murder was widely attributed to his research into corruption involving governmental figures, which made Fico's position untenable. Yet, a trusted aide, Robert Pellegrini,

<sup>104</sup> But in the general election of February 2020, PS/SPOLU nevertheless failed to clear the increased threshold of 7% for party alliances.

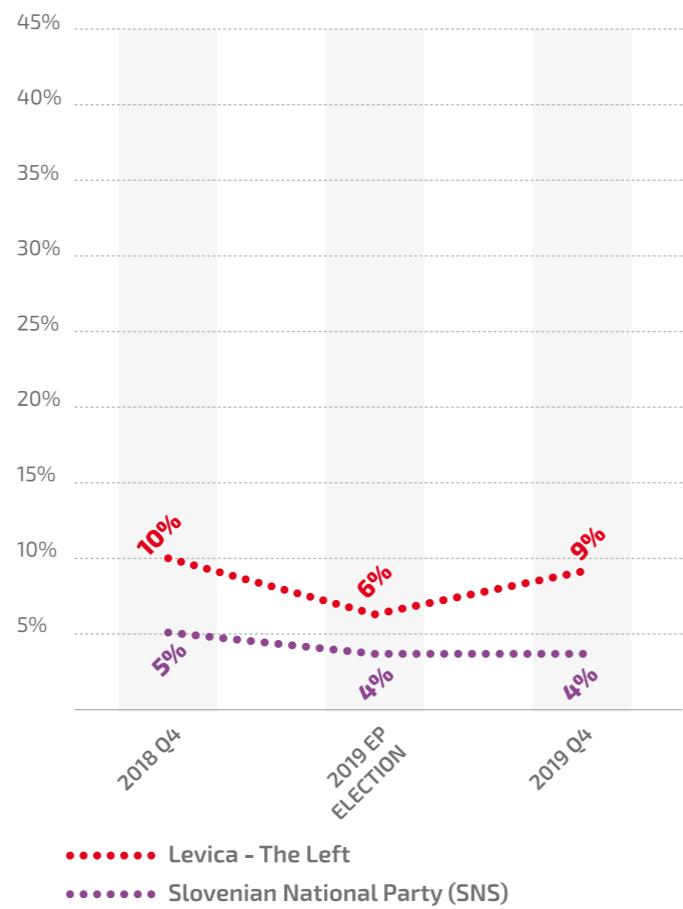
<sup>105</sup> See here: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/28/europe/slovakia-neofascists-kotleba-intl/index.html>



# Slovenia

We observed a very slight decline in the popularity of populist parties in Slovenia, as the aggregate support for the Left (Levica) and the nationalist Slovenian National Party (SNS) dropped from 15% to 13% in 2019. Both of these formations were one percentage point less popular in December 2019 than they had been a year earlier. But regardless of the public opinion polling data, both Levica and SNS concluded a highly unsuccessful year in 2019. To nuance the overall picture, however, it needs to be noted that the mainstream parties in Slovenia increasingly adopt populist rhetoric in their political communication.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN SLOVENIA



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Levica - The Left	-	10%	6%
Slovenian National Party (SNS)	-	5%	4%

For the Slovenian democratic socialist Left (Levica) party, 2019 began with high hopes, in large part due to the elections for the European Parliament. The GUE/NGL group in the European Parliament nominated a Levica politician, Violeta Tomič, as their Spitzenkandidat. Despite this edge, Levica's campaign was not successful at all. The party's top candidate performed abysmally in the television debate; the left-wing politician got a very low score from viewers for her participation in both

the European and the domestic debate.<sup>106</sup> It was also striking that Levica failed to include new issues in their campaign, even their main campaign slogan, "For a Europe of people, not capital", was almost identical with the message they had used a year earlier in the campaign for the national parliamentary election.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Klarič, M., 2019. First Defeat of the "Levica" and Victory of the Traditional Established Parties - RLS Brüssel. (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Büro Brüssel). Available at: <https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/1451/first-defeat-of-the-levica-and-victory-of-the-traditional-established-parties.html>.

<sup>107</sup> ibid

Ultimately, Levica received a little over 6% of the votes in the EP election, which meant that they failed to win a seat in the European Parliament. This was a disappointment especially since just a year earlier the party had performed 3 points better in the parliamentary election.

But the disappointing EP election result was not the only reason why 2019 shaped up to be a bad year for Levica. In the autumn of 2019, the party finally withdrew its support for the governing parties after months of tension with the coalition. Although Levica was not officially part of the Slovenian government, it supported the minority government in parliament. In the early phase, the relationship worked exceedingly well, but after the EP election tensions began to rise as Levica started to urge the government to implement the projects it had pledged in exchange for the left-wing populist party's support in parliament. Levica began to openly criticise the government, arguing that it was too right-wing and was shifting in a neoliberal and authoritarian direction.<sup>108</sup>

Tensions escalated further thereafter, primarily on account of the differences in the respective economic and healthcare policies of the governing parties and Levica. But Levica was also exasperated because the governing parties had only fulfilled one of the thirteen promises they had made to the left-wing populist party. Levica insisted that the Slovenian government enact policies to stop the privatisation of the healthcare system; to increase the wages of student workers; and to make progress on the problem of housing – this last area was the only one where some progress was achieved as a new law was adopted to regulate the work of realtors.

The split finally became inevitable when the governing parties failed to support Levica's initiative to eliminate auxiliary healthcare insurance – at that point Levica officially announced that it would no longer support the governing parties. Thus, the government was only able to adopt the budget for the next year with the votes of the right-wing populist Slovenian National Party and of the MPs representing national minorities.

Despite its newfound influence over the government, 2019 nevertheless did not turn out well for the Slovenian National Party. SNS, which

primarily operated with xenophobic, racist, and hate-mongering messages, only won 4% of the votes even though several polls before the election projected that the far-right nationalist party would win seats in the EP. Despite the SNS' ultimate failure, however, it is important to note that it is not alone in Slovenia in deploying a robustly populist rhetoric. The party of the former prime minister Janez Janša (who is once again the prime minister as of March 2020), the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), has also taken a decisive turn towards right-wing populism in recent years.

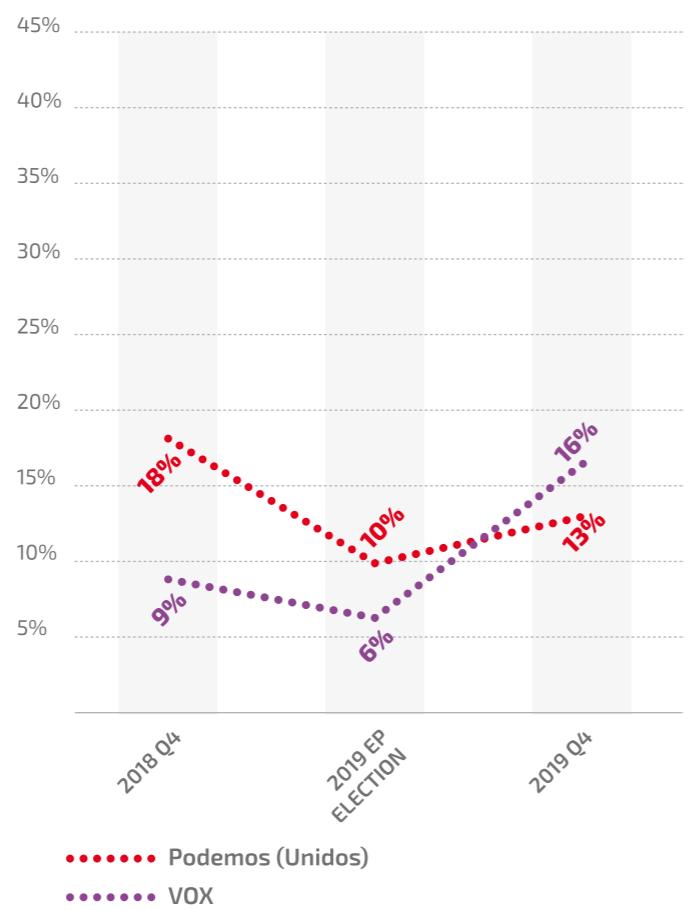
2020 is shaping up favourably for Janez Janša's SDS, which will exploit political uncertainty in Slovenia. Janša has successfully cobbled together a parliamentary alliance (consisting of the Slovenian Democratic Party, the Modern Centre Party, the New Slovenia party and the Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia) to reclaim the prime minister's office without an early election. In the case of an early election, the minor parliamentary parties might well drop out of parliament, and they may turn towards the controversial Janša – whom they had frequently criticised – to avoid this fate. However, there is a risk that a Janez Janša-led government will take Slovenia in an illiberal direction, a process which may be assisted by Janša's ally, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán.



# Spain

For many years, Spain, along with Portugal, featured a near unique constellation of populism, what may be called the "Iberian exception" – namely the absence of a substantial far-right populist party. Like several of the Mediterranean EU Member States, Spain has had a left-wing populist party, Podemos, which simultaneously criticised neoliberal economics and the corruption of the political elite. But in 2018 and 2019, the focus on the issue of Catalonian independence along with the inability of mainstream political parties to form a government recently combined to give a major boost to a new party, namely Vox, the first successful right-wing populist party in Spain since the country's democratisation in the 1970s.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN SPAIN



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Podemos (Unidos)	GUE/NGL	18%	10%
VOX	ECR	9%	16%

2019 became the year of decline for Podemos, with the party dropping from 18% in the last quarter of 2018 to 14.3% and only fourth place in the general election held in April 2019. The party performed even more disappointingly in the EP election in May, when it only won 10% of the vote. Even though the EP election proved to be the low-point for Podemos thus far, its 12.9% in the snap general election held in November was still far below its previous expectations, and they cemented the centre-left PSOE's comeback as the dominant party on the left for the time being. Podemos is thus "reined in", and after a crisis of several months in which no government could be formed at all because the

parties who could have cobbled together a coalition could not agree on one, PSOE and Podemos have finally put together a minority government that can hope to govern with the outside support of regional parties.<sup>109</sup> Podemos is entering a coalition at a volatile time, as the party is in a slump already, and experience suggests that when a coalition government is successful, it is often the larger party which nominates the leader of the government that benefits the most, while all parties involved are punished when it is seen to be failing. At the same time, Podemos might well benefit for key ministerial

<sup>109</sup> See here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/world/europe/spain-pedro-sanchez-government.html>

portfolios it will control in the Sánchez government, including the social affairs portfolio headed by the party chair Pablo Iglesias.

Even as Podemos went through its phase of intense growth followed by gradual decline and, for now, stabilisation at a low level, a new populist formation, called Vox, emerged on the right. The party had received 1.57% in the 2014 EP election and was then undetectable in the polls until the middle of 2018. Before Vox hitting the Spanish political landscape like an asteroid, Spain had been the only major EU country – and only one of a few in general – without a right-wing populist party. In this respect, the Spanish political model appeared enviable, not only from a left-wing perspective, but from a conservative democratic perspective as well, since conservative democrats in many countries struggle with the problem of how to attain a majority with large far-right populist contenders in the race, and mainstream conservatives also struggle with the dilemma of whether and how to cooperate with right-wing populists in parliament.

There was a lot of speculation before Vox came along trying to figure out how Spain (and Portugal, too) had been able to avoid the typical scenario of right-wing populist parties, and many theories were advanced. Thus, for instance, one suggestion was that immigration levels in the Iberian Peninsula are somewhat lower than in some Western European states, which removed a classic breeding ground for nationalism coupled with xenophobia. Another theory has been that on account of the tectonic cultural changes in Spanish society, and social values in particular (e.g. a rise in feminism and an acceptance of LGBTQ-friendly values), there was simply less demand for traditionalist values. Both of these theories stand in need of adjustment due to the empirical evidence that there is, in fact, substantial support for both traditional social and nationalist values in Spain.

Academic research will crunch the issue further now to see how this previously unforgiving political landscape became suddenly so welcoming for the far-right, but one potential hypothesis is that the fertile ground for such a party has always existed similarly to other countries but it laid fallow due to a lack of savvy political entrepreneurs, and because it needed one more issue that set fire to the simmering nationalist tension. Ultimately, that was not mainly immigration (although it is also a concern) but the challenge of the Catalan independence efforts,

which seem like a major threat to the integrity of Spain as it is understood by Spanish nationalists.

One factor that sets Vox's rise clearly apart from Podemos is the speed: Although Podemos emerged fairly quickly as a major force as well, it still took several years for them to increase their support step-by-step. Vox, by contrast, was still nowhere in the polls as recently as the third quarter of 2018, but a mere few months later, in the national elections of April 2019, the party won 10.3%, which was a major leap forward. On the populism front – and to a significant extent in Spanish politics in general – Podemos, while performing solidly in 2019, was no longer the real story, it had been replaced by Vox as the sensational news. By the time the political establishment admitted that it could not handle the challenge of forming a national government with the majority constellations in parliament, Vox had surged to 15.1% and finished third in the election. It also edged out Podemos and the Citizens Party (Ciudadanos), a centrist party that was seen as the great mainstream hope among those non-extremist voters who had enough of the PP and PSOE alternating in government. Vox's firm position for now in Spanish politics will make life much harder for the other parties because it will become more difficult to form a majority with Vox taking up so much space on the right. Even a formal coalition between PP, Vox and the Citizens Party may come, highlighting a difference to Germany, where centre-right parties thus far prefer to cooperate with centre-left parties while they completely shun the right-wing populist AfD.

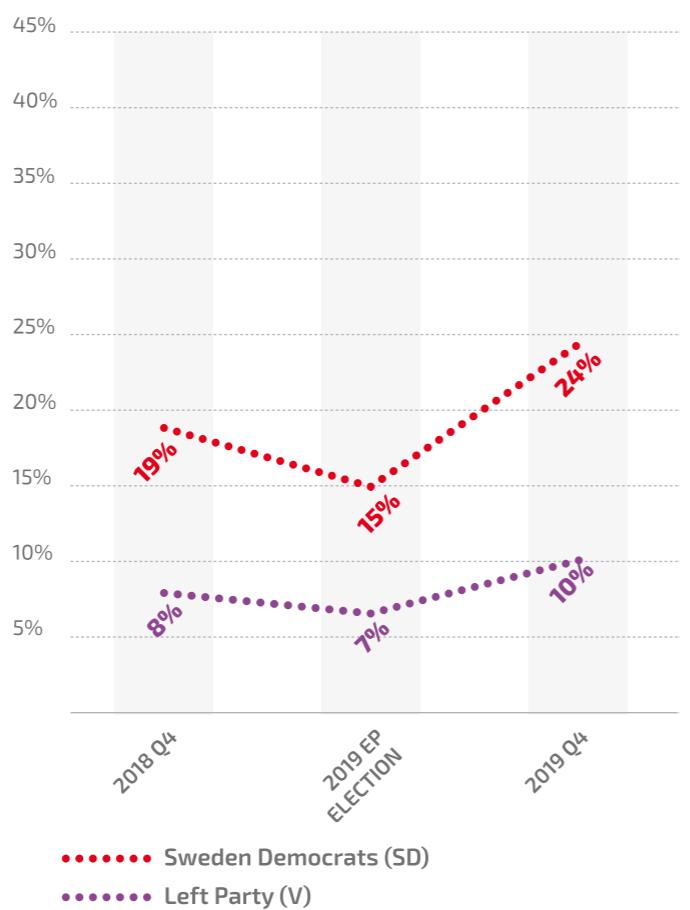
In summary, the total strength of populist parties in Spain shows a slight increase over 2018, with 29% at the end of 2019 as compared to just 27% at the end of 2018. However, if we disaggregate these figures, we see a significant drop in the support of Podemos and an even more significant increase in Vox's support, which nearly doubled in 2019. These dynamics are likely going to become more uncomfortable for Podemos still since the party has now submitted itself to the responsibilities and fetters that governing in coalition with a larger mainstream party implies. Vox, by contrast, can continue to criticize from the comfort of the opposition ranks in parliament. For mainstream politics, the challenge of populism is rising while its face is changing; it looks like nationalism, xenophobia and reactionary social policies are currently playing a greater role than left-wing populism.



# Sweden

As a result of the rise of the Swedish right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), there was no majority after the September 2018 election for either the left or the right bloc in parliament. It was only after months of wrangling that prime minister Stefan Löfven finally managed to secure a deal for a continuation of his Red-Green minority government.

## SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES IN SWEDEN



Political Group in the European Parliament	Support in Q4 2018	Share of the votes in the 2019 EP election	Support in Q4 2019
Left Party (V)	GUE/NGL	8%	7%
Sweden Democrats (SD)	ECR	19%	15%

Since the new-old government of Stefan Löfven was installed in January 2019, the main governing party, the Social Democrats, have slowly but perceptibly lost support, falling from 28% to 24% at the end of 2019. The traditionally strongest party in Sweden is now roughly on par with the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, which has profited the most from the aforementioned developments, rising from 19% in early 2019 to 24% by the end of the year. As numerous international media outlets noted with alarm, this was a record result for the Sweden Democrats and a sign that a serious shift may be underway in Swedish public opinion, which could potentially result in mainstreaming the Sweden Democrats. In the meanwhile, the left-

wing populists were essentially stagnant, polling at around 10% throughout most of the year.

In the EP election of May 2019, the Sweden Democrats lagged behind their support in the polls, winning only 15.34% even though they stood around 18%-19% in the polls at the time. Similarly, the Left Party (V) also won only 6.8% despite being backed by 9%-10% in the May polls. One key to the success of the Sweden Democrats is their open appeal to welfare chauvinism, a combination of promising what are fundamentally left-wing welfare policies while arguing that the individual benefits should accrue based on ethnicity and that solidarity cannot work in a multicultural

society.<sup>110</sup> The appeal to working class voters and those who struggle economically is certainly not exceptional, much of the far-right has tried to appeal to working class voters. Mixing nationalism with an economically populist appeal is also a basic tenet of Bannonism in the US, for example. But these are seldom cast as openly as social democratic policies as the Sweden Democrats do in invoking the folkhem-project, which was once the core social democratic vision of society in Sweden. And it appears to be resonating with the target audience: the SD does exceedingly well both among working class voters and those who are economically inactive (both also demographic groups where the Social Democrats poll strongly), as well as in terms of the regional distribution of its results, as it does better in traditional Social Democratic Party strongholds than in areas where the centre-right tends to be more popular. Affluent and highly educated voters are far less likely to support the SD.<sup>111</sup>

The party has also used its limited power in five municipalities that it controls to highlight some key aspects of its platform and to show voters how Sweden would look differently under SD control. The Sweden Democrats control of party chairman Jimmie Åkesson's hometown of Söderhamn, for instance, a small municipality with some 10,000 inhabitants. Here, the SD mayor – Åkesson's fiancée Louise Eriksson – has removed the rainbow flag that was flown to celebrate gay pride day, and she has also banned children from wearing Islamic headscarves and has intervened in the cultural events organised by the municipality to enforce a programme more aligned with the SD's ideology. In the process, she fired the head of the municipality's culture department after she criticised these moves in public.<sup>112</sup> Such culture war issues have little impact on the everyday life of Swedes – even in the municipality where they are directly enacted – but they serve well in generating media attention and provide an easy way of publicly disseminating SD's ideas, polarising Swedish society further in the process. Although growing polarisation may impede the SD's efforts to join the government (even if the party is mulling changes to its programme to attract younger voters, which would require a toning down of some of its more controversial stances<sup>113</sup>), the rise

<sup>110</sup> See here: <https://www.hertie-school.org/the-governance-post/2019/02/the-sweden-democrats-exclusion-politics/>

<sup>111</sup> See here: [https://www.svt.se/omoss/media/filer\\_public/5c/17/5c17fc91-31c4-4e0a-a17f-b42318edfa44/valresultat\\_riksdagsval\\_pk\\_2018\\_vagda\\_0912.pdf](https://www.svt.se/omoss/media/filer_public/5c/17/5c17fc91-31c4-4e0a-a17f-b42318edfa44/valresultat_riksdagsval_pk_2018_vagda_0912.pdf)

<sup>112</sup> See here: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/11/03/far-right-sweden-democrats-party-seeks-become-countrys-largest/>

<sup>113</sup> See here: <https://svtigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=7349850>

in the support of SD that this attention seems to engender might help make it a national player that is very difficult to circumvent.

In a sense, already the cumbersome process of government formation highlighted many of the future problems that a further increase in the support of the Sweden Democrats might bring. The opposition leader, Ulf Kristersson, entertained the idea of setting up a centre-right minority government tolerated by the right-wing populist group in the Swedish parliament, the Riksdag. It was only the veto of two of his smaller coalition partners, the Centre Party and the Liberals that forestalled the experiment for the time being. In the long-run, however, it is difficult to imagine a right-wing majority that does not in some way feature the cooperation of the Sweden Democrats.<sup>114</sup> Moderate leader Kristersson and Ebba Busch Thor, the leader of another right-wing party, the Christian Democrats, have recognised this, with both pushing the right to open up towards the SD as their counterparts in Denmark had done. Even if the incumbent government will prove unpopular, the shift would be very unlikely to be massive enough to result in an outright majority of the centre-right without the SD.

With the Swedish government continuously subject to bartering deals with disparate partners, it will be difficult to enact policies that follow a clear and transparent programme that voters can evaluate and reward the government for. The lacking majorities in this system might have the impact of creating in the voters' eyes a single mass of mainstream politics with hard-to-distinguish players, all the while the right-wing populists and the left-wing populists emerge as main opposition parties. This is not an inevitable fate, of course, the government can through careful negotiation develop popular policies that increase its support and present a clear and obviously better alternative to the Sweden Democrats (or the Left). Those segments of the centre-right who are not involved in the government also have the option of offering a clear alternative and to distinguish themselves from both the centre-left government and the right-wing populist segment of the opposition. But clearly, that is not how the first year of the new government has shaped up, at this point the Sweden Democrats alone have profited.

<sup>114</sup> See here: <https://atlanticsentinel.com/2019/12/swedish-center-right-adjusts-to-rise-of-far-right/>



# Conclusion: The State of Populism in the European Union

In a macro perspective, 2019 has been a mixed year for populist parties in the European Union. In half of Europe's Member States, the aggregate support for populist parties declined. In Austria, Croatia, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy and Latvia the decline was fairly significant, exceeding 5 points, when compared to 2018.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>115</sup> For more details, see here: <https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker/the-populism-graph>

However, roughly the same number of countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Poland and Sweden) saw a populist surge over 5 points in the polls against 2018 data. It thus indicates that in most cases the aggregate polling of populist parties remained relatively stable, in the +/- 5-point range. It is vital though to point out that in some cases this aggregate stability concealed a significant shift of support between different populist parties. Also, there were significant shifts during the year and, from the perspective of the populists, it was only towards the last months of 2019 that the situation "re-stabilised" to reflect the level of their support at the end of 2018.

A significant datapoint in looking at 2019 was that several (but by no means all) populist parties performed worse in the run-up towards the May 2019 European Parliamentary elections than their polling ahead of the election suggested. Finally, roughly one-third of the MEPs were delegated by a populist party, two-thirds are member of a mainstream and/or pro-European political force. In general terms, the hyped hijacking of populist parties in the European Parliament was less

pronounced than the polls and the media would have predicted. As is the case with some prominent populist parties such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Vox in Spain and the Sweden Democrats – all of which polled well later in the year, and Vox performing robustly in the snap national election of November 2019, too.

In the perspective of mainstream politics, a disaster was averted in the EP election because the populist gains were not as massive as anticipated. Also, the right-wing populist parties are for now too disparate and internally divided to act with the unity and coordination that would make them more powerful at the European level. However, these forces are more influential in the Council, where Member States led by populist government have the right to veto in many questions. So, the five-year reprieve at the European level should not be misunderstood in Brussels as a sign that the problem has been contained for the duration of the EP's electoral term. As the data presented above suggest, in most EU countries the support of populist parties has stabilised, and it did so at historically high levels. Even if the rise of populists has not continued at a

previous pace in most countries, this stabilisation should not be taken as a sign that the political dynamics in these countries have "normalised" or that the threat of anti-European and illiberal challenges is now ended.

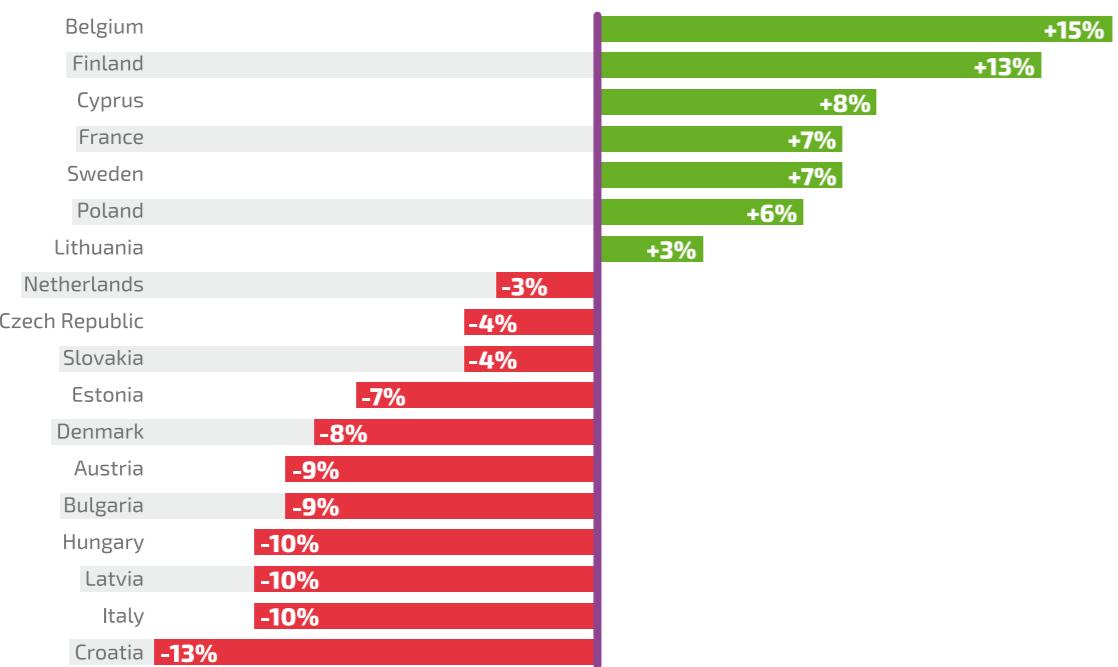
Additionally, there is another reason why the EP election in itself was atypical with respect to the performance of populists. As seen across a number of national elections in 2019, many (again, not all) populist parties performed solidly and on par with their polling, sometimes in stark contrast of a weak EP result.

The Spanish Vox, for example, is a case in point: With a mere 6.2% in the EP election and over 15% in the national election in November 2019, the party showed that it could mobilise voters when it counted the most. Populists also experienced a breakthrough in Estonia, where the Conservative People's Party (EKRE) registered an almost 10-point growth as compared to 2015 and became a governing party. Flemish Interest in Belgium registered a more than three-fold increase over its previously weak result of 3.7% and emerged as the second strongest party. In Poland, the governing Law and Justice (PiS) did substantially better than four years ago, securing 43.6% of the vote even as the new further-right Confederation Liberty and Independence coalition (comprises KORWIN and other right-wing populist and far-right parties) got another 6.8%, giving thus the right-wing populist party a majority of the popular vote. And even without improving on their previous

results, populist parties also did well in Finland and Greece (see Graph 2). In the Netherlands, the provincial elections brought a massive breakthrough for the recently created Forum for Democracy (FvD); the party won the largest number of votes and took 12 seats in the Dutch Senate.

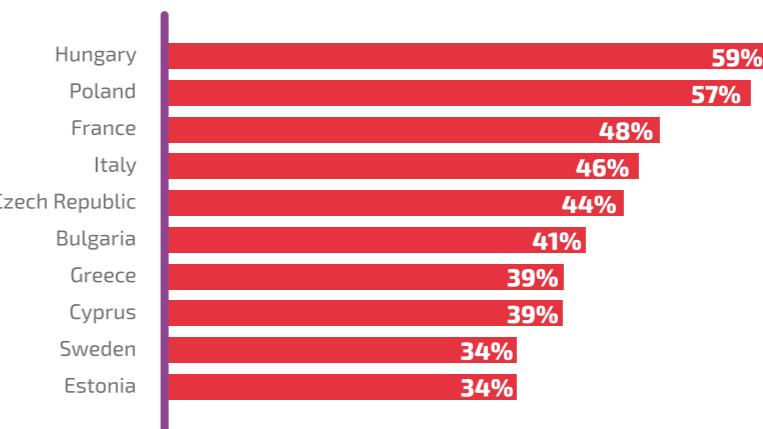
Two exceptions to the atypical 2019 populist trend stand out, however. In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) took a huge hit from the Ibiza Scandal<sup>116</sup> involving its leader at the time, Heinz-Christian Strache, but it is not clear yet whether this will permanently weaken the FPÖ in the immediate future. In 2017, the party had led the polls with the support of over a third of the Austrian electorate and in the presidential election its candidate received almost half of the votes (46.2%), showing that despite being regarded as a populist party by large swathes of the Austrian and international public, the FPÖ can reach vast segments of the Austrian electorate. The other exception is Denmark, where the Danish People's Party dropped from 21.1% in 2015 (and 17% in the polls at the end of 2018) to a surprisingly low 8.7% at the end of 2019. This gradual weakening of the Danish People's Party's performance marked a significant turn in the history of one of the most successful populist parties in Scandinavia. The Danish model, discussed in more detail in the respective country chapter was

<sup>116</sup> See the details of Ibiza Scandal here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/austria-ibiza-scandal-sting-operation-what-happened-why-does-it-matter>



Graph 1: Countries with significant change of support for populist parties in 2019

Source: <https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker/the-populism-graph>



Graph 2: Countries with the highest aggregate support for populist parties at the end of 2019

Source: <https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker/the-populism-map>

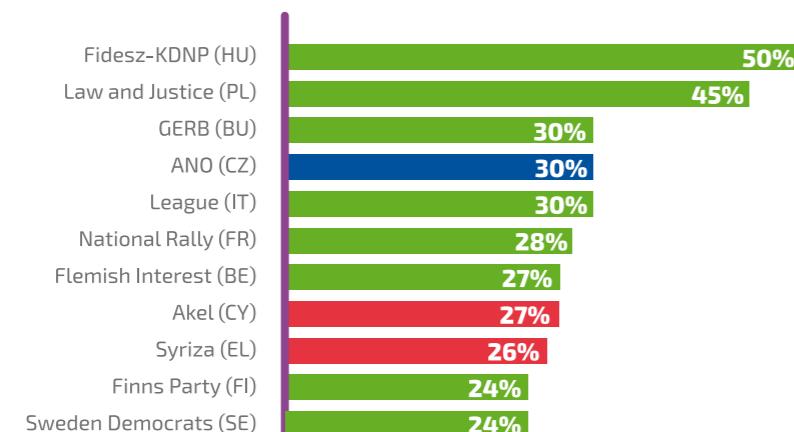
the only election last year that promised a non-incidental approach towards populist containment, but that clearly came at a price for mainstream politics which has shifted decisively to the right on issues of immigration and multi-culturalism. As the Danish example highlights, our analysis captures only one aspect of populism, namely the polling/electoral result of populist parties. The impact of populism on the policies and rhetoric of other parties is not directly reflected in the polls. It is, however, a tangible result of rising populism even though its long-term impact is still unclear.

A geographic overview of the strength of populism in Europe continues to reinforce the trend observed in previous years, namely that populism is far more pronounced in the Central and Eastern European Member States than in Western Europe, even if right-wing populism has gained notable strength in the latter too. The four countries with the highest share of voters supporting populist parties are all Central and Eastern European and this part of the continent is also where populism is most likely to be the major governing force and where populism has arguably had the deepest impact on mainstream politics.

The most emblematic populists continue to be the dominant parties in Hungary and Poland – Fidesz and PiS respectively –, which have pursued significant efforts to dismantle democracy and the rule-of-law. These two are the most pressing

reminder of the threat that populism constitutes to democracy, the future trajectory of this region and thus for the EU project overall. The impact of populist discourse (and sometimes policies) of parties that do not – or do not yet – qualify as populist, on mainstream politics in other words is also most apparent in Central and Eastern Europe, and it explains why – unlike in Western Europe – there are also several successful populist parties in the region, such as GERB in Bulgaria, ANO in Czechia, OĽaNO in Slovakia and the Centre Party in Estonia that do not qualify as either far-right or far-left.<sup>117</sup> The pervasiveness of populism in the region suggests that it has a whole different quality and impact on politics in general than in Western Europe, where the political quarantine against populism is leaky but still largely functional.

Another 2019 trend to highlight was that in many European countries the right-wing populists made gains while the left-wing populists tended to stagnate or even decline. This trend reinforces our earlier argument about the relative aggregate stability of populism, which in several cases masked a rise in the strength of the right-wing populist parties. For different reasons, the left-wing populists saw a downturn in Greece and Spain, two of its bastions, while it stagnated or lost slightly in most countries where it is present. Among the 10



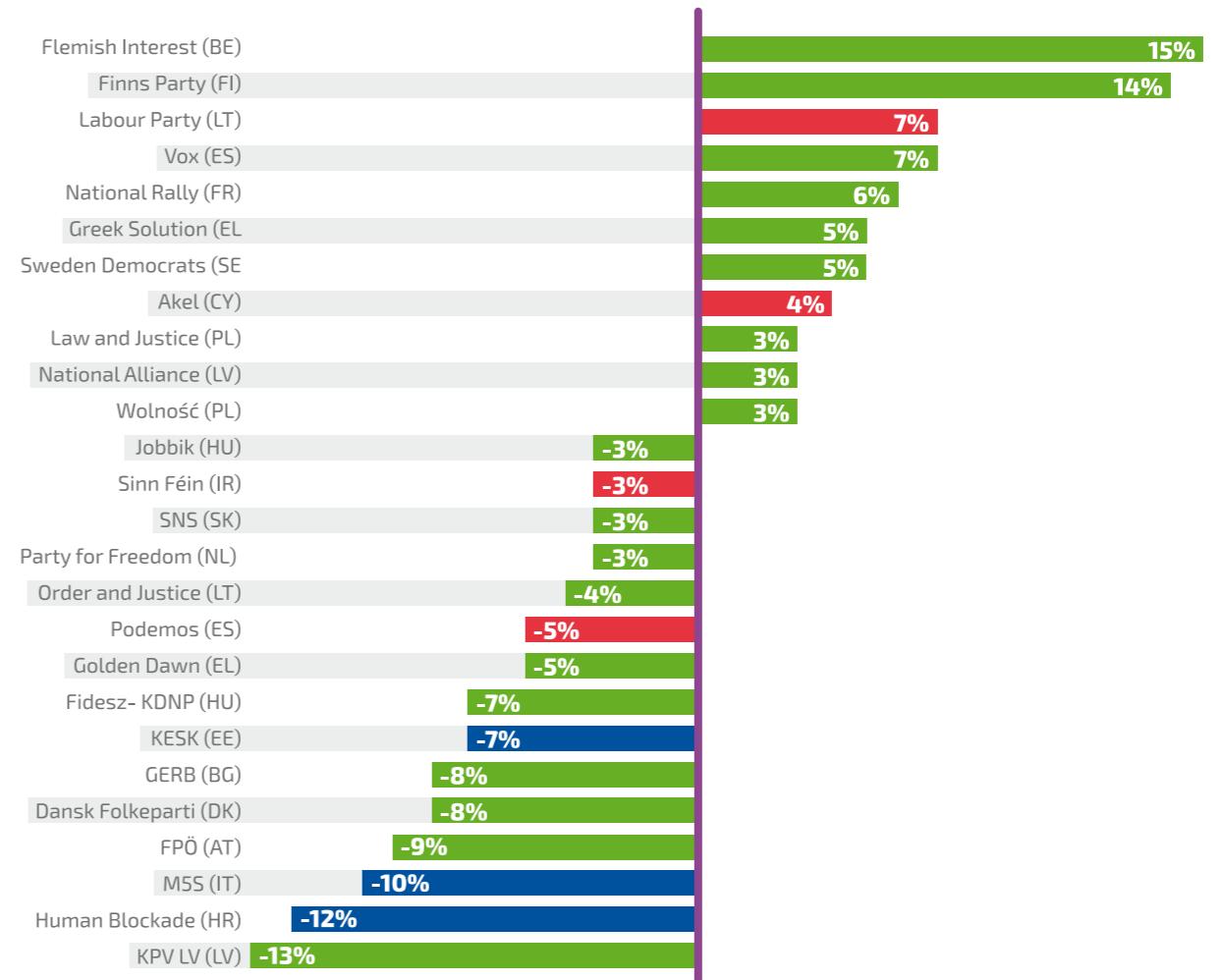
Graph 3: Populist parties with the largest support at the end of 2019

Red: left-wing populist party; Green: right-wing populist party; Blue: not categorized

Source: <https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker/the-populism-map>

populist parties that experienced the highest gains in 2019, only one left-wing party, AKEL in Cyprus, secured a relatively modest gain of 4 percent.

All in all, 2019 marks yet another year when European politics has shifted to the right. Not dramatically but discernibly. This is exerting a lasting impact on European and national politics and leaves an imprint on mainstream politics, too. The rightward drift is also manifest in the European public reaction to the resurgence of the refugee crisis in the wake of Turkey's decision to push Syrian refugees towards the EU and the EU's decision to look the other way while Greece essentially bars them from entering Europe. At this point, it is impossible to anticipate how the coronavirus pandemic will affect the public's



Graph 4: Populist parties with significant change in 2019

Red: left-wing populist party; Green: right-wing populist party; Blue: not categorized

Source: <https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker/the-populism-graph>

## INDEX: List of Populist Parties in the European Union

*Only parties with support of 2% or more are included in this book.*

COUNTRY	PARTY NAME IN ENGLISH	ABBREVIATION
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	FPÖ
Belgium	Flemish Interest	VB
Bulgaria	Attack	Ataka
Bulgaria	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria	GERB
Bulgaria	Bulgarian National Movement	IMRO
Bulgaria	Volya	Volya
Croatia	Human Blockade	Zivi Zid
Croatia	Milan Bandić 365 - The Party of Labour and Solidarity	Milan Bandić 365
Cyprus	Citizens' Alliance	SYPOL
Cyprus	National Popular Front	ELAM
Cyprus	Progressive Party of the Working People	AKEL
Czech Republic	ANO	ANO
Czech Republic	Czech Communist Party	KSČM
Czech Republic	Freedom and Direct Democracy	SPD
Denmark	Danish People's Party	O
Denmark	People's Party Against the EU	N
Estonia	Conservative People's Party of Estonia	EKRE
Estonia	Estonian Centre Party	KESK
Finland	Finns Party	PS
Finland	Left Alliance	VAS
France	France Arise	DLF
France	France Untamed / La France Insoumise	FI
France	French Communist Party	PCF
France	National Rally (former National Front)	FN
Germany	Alternative for Germany	AFD
Germany	The Left (Die Linke)	DIE LINKE
Greece	Coalition of the Radical Left	SYRIZA

Greece	Communist Party of Greece	KKE
Greece	Golden Dawn	XA
Greece	Greek Solution	EL
Hungary	Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Union & KDNP	Fidesz
Hungary	Jobbik Movement for a Better Hungary	Jobbik
Ireland	Sinn Féin	SF
Ireland	Solidarity–People Before Profit	AAA-PBP
Italy	Five Star Movement	M5S
Italy	League	Lega
Latvia	National Alliance	NA
Latvia	Who Owns the State?	KPV LV
Lithuania	Labour Party	DP
Lithuania	Order and Justice	TT
Luxembourg	The Left (Déi Lénk)	Déi Lénk
Netherlands	Forum for Democracy	FvD
Netherlands	Party for Freedom	PVV
Netherlands	Socialist Party	SP
Poland	Kukiz'15	K'15
Poland	Law and Justice	PiS
Poland	Wolność - Liberty	KORWiN
Portugal	Left Block	BE
Portugal	Unitary Democratic Coalition	CDU
Slovakia	Kotleba – People's Party - Our Slovakia	ĽSNS
Slovakia	Ordinary People	OL'aNO
Slovakia	Slovak National Party	SNS
Slovakia	We Are Family	Sme Rodina
Slovenia	Levica - The Left	Levica
Slovenia	Slovenian National Party	SNS
Spain	Podemos (Unidos)	UP
Spain	VOX	VOX
Sweden	Left Party	V
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	SD



## **FEPS is the European progressive political foundation**

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the social democratic political family at the European level. Our mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe. We operate as hub for thinking to facilitate the emergence of progressive answers to the challenges that Europe faces today.

FEPS works in close partnership with its members and partners, forging connections and boosting coherence amongst stakeholders from the world of politics, academia and civil society at local, regional, national, European and global levels.

Our ambition is to undertake intellectual reflection for the benefit of the progressive movement, and to promote the founding principles of the European Union – freedom, equality, solidarity, democracy, respect of human rights, fundamental freedoms and human dignity, and respect for the rule of law.

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Policy Solutions is a progressive political research institute based in Budapest. It is committed to the values of liberal democracy, solidarity, equal opportunity and European integration. Amongst the pre-eminent areas of its research are the investigation of how the quality of democracy evolves, the analysis of factors driving euro-scepticism and the far-right, and election research.

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## State of Populism in Europe 2020

This volume presents the work of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Policy Solutions over the last year, reviewing the trends and the most important activities of populist parties in the 27 EU countries. In this book we outline how the populist parties' popularity evolved over this period – almost like an encyclopaedia. Our goal is to learn in finer detail about European and national political trends, and to thereby help both the researchers of this issue as well as those who work on ensuring that Europe continues to preserve its progressive values in the coming decades.

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