

Responding to Populist Rhetoric: A Guide





Counterpoint is a research consultancy that uses social science methods to examine social, political and cultural dynamics. With a focus on how civil society operates in different contexts, Counterpoint helps governments, NGOs and visionary businesses to develop solutions for more resilient and prosperous societies.



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1 Introduction: a pivotal set of elections

The European Parliament elections in May signalled a decisive shift in the political dynamics of this key institution. The significant increase in MEPs from a range of populist parties – a few extreme, some xenophobic, most Eurosceptic – presents new challenges for the mainstream political groups. In the weeks following the elections, these challenges were thrown into sharp relief as mainstream politicians were faced with a set of unenviable dilemmas: should mainstream political groups admit or reject national delegations with populist leanings? Should they support or block their appointment to committee chairmanships? And should they confront them in parliamentary debate or ignore their attention-seeking tactics?

One of the greatest challenges mainstream politicians face is the captivating power of populist language. Ahead of the elections, Counterpoint produced a series of briefings examining the rhetoric of populist politicians in the European Parliament. We analysed exchanges between populists and their fellow MEPs and gave recommendations for how to respond effectively to their rhetoric. Building on our extensive research on populist parties, the briefings were for politicians and campaigners looking to develop a response to populist parties both inside and outside the Parliament. In this companion publication, we collect the most important examples, analyses and lessons from the briefings.

But why should MEPs focus on populist rhetoric as a major cause of concern? The answer to this question is threefold. In this introduction, we make the case for the significance and urgency of understanding populist discourse and building a compelling response. We argue that:

- While populist parties vary significantly according to national context, they share similar tactics and rhetoric;
- The plenary debates in the European Parliament are a valuable resource for understanding this rhetoric; and
- This rhetoric poses a threat to open societies in Europe by paralysing the European Parliament and delegitimising institutions that protect minority rights.

Populism: different contexts, similar rhetoric

Much hay was made in the media of the rise of populism in May's European Parliament elections. But at first glance the populists that performed well – from the moderate, agrarian Finns Party to the anti-immigration, radical right Front National in France and the extremist, anti-Semitic Jobbik in Hungary – appear to have little in common with each other. Their policy prescriptions, voter bases, and hot-button issues differ according to national context. And their alliances in the new European Parliament appear markedly diverse, with the Finns and the Danish People's Party opting for the large conservative ECR group; UKIP and the Five Star Movement forming their own group, the precarious Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD); and the Front National, Jobbik and others falling to the side-lines of the Parliament in its "non-attached" section.

Yet despite these differing contexts and scenarios, populist parties do share a range of tactics and rhetoric. Populist politicians of whatever stripe are relentless in their defence of the "ordinary people", positioning themselves as the representatives of the common man and woman in opposition to a fickle, self-interested elite. They depict themselves as rebels and their mainstream counterparts as crooks complicit in a rotten system. At the same time, they often try to co-opt values like democracy, tolerance, freedom and human rights and use them against mainstream politicians. In this publication we illustrate, with a series of examples, how populist politicians from across Europe use these tactics again and again, and how this approach is effective despite its apparent lack of sophistication.

The debates in the European Parliament: a valuable resource

In our briefings ahead of the elections, we focused on examples of dialogue from the European Parliament for two reasons. First, because we suspected (rightly) that a great deal more populist politicians would be in the European Parliament after the 2014 elections. This now means that MEPs from the mainstream political groups are more likely to spend a greater proportion of their time engaging with populists. The briefings can therefore be used as a guide to how populist rhetoric has been handled in the past and how it can be dealt with in the future.

But the briefings were also intended for those working beyond the walls of the European Parliament. The second reason for our focus on the plenary debates was that it provided a vital resource for understanding how populists interact with other politicians. The European Parliament is a perfect laboratory for exploring which responses to populist rhetoric work – and which do not.

How populist rhetoric can delegitimise institutions and put minority rights at risk

In carrying out this work, our main concern is with the danger that populist parties pose to open societies in Europe. So, we focus on rhetoric that seeks to undermine openness and tolerance, whether it emphasises immigration, Roma inclusion or minority rights. But populists do not threaten these values just by using overtly discriminatory speech. Their rhetoric and grandstanding undermine openness by relentlessly targeting and delegitimising the institutions that stand for the active protection of minority rights. Looking at exchanges in plenary debates in the European Parliament makes this abundantly clear.

In Parliament, populist politicians are not just speaking to their supporters. It is therefore much harder for them in this setting to make directly discriminatory statements. Outside of Parliament, politicians from the same parties have crossed the line and have made statements that are more clearly xenophobic and racist (such as Geert Wilders encouraging his supporters to chant that they want “fewer” Moroccans in the Netherlands¹ or Lega Nord MEP Mario Borghezio describing the Italian government as “bongo bongo” due to the inclusion of Cecile Kyenge, Italy’s first black minister).² But in the European Parliament they tend to tread a much more careful line, weary of their most immediate audience: the Parliament’s other members.

This means that monitoring the rhetoric of populists in the European Parliament becomes a far murkier affair: in true populist fashion the targets of their speeches are often not minorities but the political elite – the other MEPs, who they hold responsible for “selling out” the sovereignty and rights of “ordinary” people. But even though populist MEPs generally avoid “frontal” attacks against minorities, their rhetoric towards other parliamentarians still poses a danger. Populists do not follow the standard, informal rules of debate in the European Parliament: their attacks can be aggressive, unrelenting and infuriating. This can be extremely difficult to handle. Populists break expectations and protocol in ways that are fundamentally destabilising – and difficult to counter without resorting to the same unsavoury tactics. MEPs are damned if they do engage in similar ways – and damned if they don’t. En masse these tactics can create institutional paralysis and weaken the effectiveness of the Parliament, an institution that has done a great deal of work to defend Europe from xenophobia and intolerance.

But, can rhetoric really cause that much damage? In the last Parliament, where populists made up a small minority of the total number of MEPs, their rhetoric only had limited effect. But in the current Parliament things could be set to change significantly. With far more populist MEPs in the Parliament, debates on sensitive issues

could be hijacked by these voices. And this really could shift the terms of the debate – a first step to deeper policy changes in the future. Outside the European Parliament, too, populist rhetoric – combined with success at the polls – has influenced mainstream party policy. So far mainstream voices have struggled to find a response that really stops the populists in their tracks.

In this publication, we illustrate the different rhetorical tactics honed by populist politicians. These include:

- Both general attacks on the “career political class” and personal insults directed at particular politicians
- Heavy sarcasm and mockery of political institutions, particularly the EU
- Communicating with a deep sense of urgency, in order to compel others to take up their cause
- Metaphors that elicit feelings of insecurity around immigration – for instance, discontent with immigration is a “boiling pot” ready to explode; our country has been “invaded” by immigrants; our country is our home and immigrants are unwanted guests
- Hinting at controversial stereotypes and extremist statements whilst avoiding explicit racism

In sum, populists from a range of different traditions often engage in rhetoric about immigration and minority rights in the European Parliament in ways that can be highly debilitating. Here we give examples of this rhetoric and discuss how campaigners and politicians can develop an effective response.

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2 Context: five populist parties

Populist parties prosper – and in some cases founder – in different political contexts. Because of this, populist parties come in different varieties and some are far more radical than others. Distinguishing between populists is therefore vital, even if it is at times confusing, ambiguous and laden with traps. The appendix to this volume includes Counterpoint’s colour-coded chart for distinguishing between different populist parties, as well as a detailed methodology explaining the reasoning behind our categorisation.

In this publication, we focus our attention on five populist parties, each from a different EU Member State: the PVV (the Netherlands), the Lega Nord (Italy), UKIP (the UK), the Front National (France) and the FPÖ (Austria). We have chosen these five because they were some of the most visible and influential populist parties at this year’s elections. The Front National, UKIP and the FPÖ all achieved scores of over 20 per cent; and, while the Lega Nord and the PVV struggled, they received considerable media attention for their pledge to join forces with the Front National. By contrast, in Central and Eastern Europe populist parties (including Ataka in Bulgaria, the Slovak National Party and the Great Romania Party) tended to make less of an impact at the EU level. (One exception is Hungary – for further analysis of the populist radical right Jobbik, see the work of our partners Political Capital.)

The rhetoric of these five parties has had a steady impact on the behaviour of mainstream parties, the attitudes of the press and the overarching political debate. But there are crucial differences between them. The following sections summarise the most essential information about each party.

PVV

The PVV (Partij Voor de Vrijheid) is a Dutch party with only one member: its leader Geert Wilders. After leaving the conservative liberal VVD in 2004 and forming his own party, Wilders became well-known for his strident criticisms of Islam and Muslims. The PVV won a shocking 15% of the vote in the 2010 national election and went on to support the minority centre right coalition government.

In 2012, Wilders’ popularity suffered after bringing down the coalition due to budgetary disagreements. Since then, the PVV platform has focused on criticising

the EU.³ Wilders recently commissioned a disputed report by British firm Capital Economics citing the economic benefits of the Netherlands exiting the European Union.⁴ Ahead of the elections, he paired up with Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National in France, intending to form a united front to bring down “this monster called Europe”.⁵ Yet, since then, the two leaders have failed to find enough partners to create a formal political group in the European Parliament.

In the 2014 European elections, the PVV secured 13.3% percent of the vote.⁶

Lega Nord

The Lega Nord is an Italian party that in the past has been associated with its demands for the independence of regions in northern Italy – which it calls “Padania” – and its anti-immigration position. Since its former leader Umberto Bossi’s resignation in the wake of a corruption scandal and its poor performance in general elections in February 2013, the party has become a relatively minor player on the political scene.

Looking to rebuild its support ahead of the European Parliament elections, its new party secretary, Matteo Salvini, described the European Union as a “monster” that needed to be “slaughtered” and called the Euro a “crime against humanity”.⁷ Salvini took the Lega Nord out of its former alliance with UKIP in the European Parliament and paired up with Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National in France, in what he called an “iron pact” for a “different Europe” that is “not based on servitude to euro and banks, ready to let us die from immigration...”⁸ The party is currently non-aligned in the Parliament due to its failure to form a political group with the Front National and other parties. There are indications that Lega Nord MEPs will focus their collective energy on trade policy in the new Parliament – with a particular emphasis on opposing the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

In the 2014 European elections, the Lega Nord secured 6.2% percent of the vote.⁹

UKIP

The UK Independence Party is a populist party that argues for British withdrawal from the EU. Initially a single-issue party founded by the LSE Professor Alan Sked after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, UKIP has gained greater prominence in recent years, winning support from older, male, working class voters.¹⁰ Since the 2010 general election, UKIP’s support has surged, in part benefiting from its

anti-immigration rhetoric, its opposition to the EU's freedom of movement laws and its critique of the political elite. Nigel Farage MEP, UKIP's leader, has promised to cause an "earthquake" in British politics and is currently focusing on winning further parliamentary seats in the 2015 general election.¹¹

UKIP's leadership has strong libertarian leanings, unlike its support base. The party has advocated a flat tax and argued in favour of more international trade.¹² But at the same time it has a protectionist streak, opposing "opendoor immigration" and advocating a greater use of temporary work permits and a five-year immigration ban for people who want to settle permanently.¹³ Our research shows that MEPs from populist parties tend to have little direct impact on policy in the European Parliament's committees but are disproportionately active in parliamentary debates.¹⁴ UKIP is a prime example of this – one of its primary reasons for joining forces with other national delegations and forming a political group in the European Parliament is to ensure more speaking time in debates for Nigel Farage.

In the 2014 European elections, UKIP secured 26.8% percent of the vote.¹⁵

Front National

The Front National is one of Europe's most renowned and long-standing populist parties. The party was founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972.¹⁶ It rose to prominence in the 1980s after strong performances in European Parliament elections and local elections in the town of Dreux.¹⁷ The party is known for its fierce anti-immigration position and its hostility towards the political class. Le Pen, who led the party for nearly forty years, in the past courted controversy for his insensitive comments about the Holocaust and unsavoury connections with extremist movements. He presided over the rise of his party, reaching a personal high point with his second place finish at the 2002 presidential election.¹⁸ But in the 2007 presidential election the FN suffered as centre right candidate Nicolas Sarkozy successfully wooed their voters.¹⁹

In 2011, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie's daughter, succeeded him as leader, promising to "de-demonise" the party and remove any extremist or anti-Semitic associations. She has focused her attacks on financiers, rating agencies, multinationals and EU institutions, advocating protectionism and deriding "ultra-liberal" economic policy, and has argued that parts of Islamic belief conflict with France's republican values.²⁰ Since the younger Le Pen took to the helm, the party has gained ground, performing strongly both in the 2012 presidential election and the 2014 local elections.²¹

The Front National's electoral support is multi-layered and varies according to region – the political scientist Joël Gombin argues that "the strength of the FN comes from

the fact that it has diverse electorates", held together by a belief that the political system does not take into account their concerns.²²

In the 2014 European elections, the Front National secured 24.9% percent of the vote.²³

FPÖ

The FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) originated from movements that believed Austria should be part of a unified German nation in 1956.²⁴ In 1986, Jörg Haider became party chairman, transforming the FPÖ into a radical right-wing protest party that positioned itself against the mainstream.²⁵ It became known for its anti-establishment, anti-immigration and anti-Islam views. Under his leadership, the party's support rose from 5 percent in 1983 to 26.9 percent in 1999.²⁶ In 2000, as the second largest party in Austria, the FPÖ formed a coalition with the centre-right ÖVP. The FPÖ subsequently faced internal disagreements and falling popular support. In 2005, Haider left the FPÖ, taking other senior figures with him, to set up a new rival party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ).²⁷

Under the current leadership of Heinz-Christian "HC" Strache, the FPÖ has largely regained the electoral support it lost during its period in coalition. Like Haider before him, Strache is a charismatic politician, making particular efforts to win over young people with stunts such as rap songs.²⁸ Strache is more radical than his predecessor. The party states that it is "committed to protecting our homeland of Austria, our national identity and autonomy as well as our natural livelihood"²⁹ and advocates restrictive policies on immigration and Islam.

In the 2014 European elections, the FPÖ secured 19.7% percent of the vote.³⁰

3 The frames: understanding populist rhetoric

The rhetoric of populist politicians can be decomposed into different frames. In this section, we outline the central frames that occur again and again in populist discourse. In order to challenge populist rhetoric, these frames need to be understood and subverted. This section can be used as a guide for facing down the most pernicious populist frames.

What are frames?

Framing is an essential part of Counterpoint’s communications approach. The use of frames in political communications has been spearheaded by the American cognitive linguist George Lakoff. According to Lakoff, frames are “mental structures” that organise the way we think. In politics, frames typically contain certain “actors”, together with a problem that the frame defines and a solution that it proposes. In this way, a frame can set the terms of the debate by highlighting what is considered important in a particular policy area and side-lining what is considered irrelevant. In addition, frames correspond to certain values. So, for instance, the “Ruled from above” frame contains two sets of actors – the rulers and the ruled. According to this frame, the problem is that the ruled are at the mercy of the all-powerful, unaccountable rulers; the solution is for the ruled to be able to rule themselves. The values evoked include liberty and democracy.

Frames can be activated by certain words and phrases that have special associations. When repeated over and over, these words and phrases help to instil the frame into people’s minds, compelling people to think about a particular subject according to the logic of the frame. For instance, the phrase “political elite” can be used to activate the “Ruled from above” frame. Lakoff argues that it is essential for communicators and politicians to talk about issues using frames that evoke their own values, not their opponent’s. The worst mistake to make is to repeat your opponent’s language, because that only helps to reinforce their values.

Populist frames

Here we present five of the most important frames from our pre-election analysis together with applications and examples.

Ruled from above

Actors: the ruled and the rulers

Problem: the rulers who represent the elites have gained too much power over those they rule, the hard-working ordinary people. The ruled no longer have control over their own affairs and are at the mercy of the unaccountable rulers.

Solution: the ruled should be able to rule themselves. We must reduce the power and reach of the rulers, either by reducing their influence or by eliminating them altogether.

The frame activates the following values: Liberty, Democracy

How is the frame applied?

Typically populists present themselves as the scourge of the ruling classes and the protectors of the subjugated people. At their most forthright, they characterise contemporary democratic leaders as vicious despots, the EU as a totalitarian regime, and government policies as flagrant violations of the public will. As true representatives of the people, populists argue that they have the power to overturn the anti-democratic consensus.

Example:

“Today is the start of the liberation of Europe from the monster of Brussels”

– Geert Wilders, PVV³¹

While this frame is drawn upon by a range of different populists, it is also a particular favourite of UKIP. In using it, the party taps into a rich cultural seam of British liberalism. UKIP applies the frame in at least three ways:

The EU rules the Member States

Here the ruler is the EU and the ruled are the Member States. The EU infringes on the sovereignty of the Member States, making most of their laws and dictating what governments can and cannot do.

Example:

“all I want is a Europe consisting of individual, sovereign, democratic states”

– Nigel Farage MEP, UKIP³²

The EU rules the people

Here the ruler is again the EU, but this time the ruled are individuals themselves. In this application of the frame, individuals have no say over their rulers in Brussels, despite the EU having more and more control over their lives. EU officials, who have no interest in the wellbeing of ordinary Britons, decide who can come to live in Britain. UK citizens have lost control over who can enter the country.

Example:

"We believe in the right of the people of the UK to govern ourselves, rather than be governed by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels" – UKIP website³³

UK politicians rule the people

In this application, the rulers are Britain's politicians or "Westminster", and the ruled are the people of the UK. Politicians in the UK have grown too powerful, the state is too big, and politicians refuse to give the people a say on the issues that they care about.

Example:

"the EU is only the biggest symptom of the real problem – the theft of our democracy by a powerful, remote political 'elite' which has forgotten that it's here to serve the people." – UKIP website³⁴

The bearers of truth

Actors: the naive cowards in power, the fantasists who have put their head in the sand; vs the "truth-tellers", the realists who have the nerve to tell it as it is.

Problem: the naive cowards in power have not listened to the truth-tellers. As a result, a great disaster looms.

Solution: the naive cowards listen to the truth-tellers and disaster is averted.

The frame activates the following values: Integrity, Foresight, Courage

How is the frame applied?

For populists, mainstream politicians are the "naive cowards" and they and their supporters are the "truth-tellers". Populists do their best to warn the liberal pro-EU mainstream of its mistakes and of the terrible consequences of ignoring the growing fury of the European populace. But the political elite refuse to listen.

Politicians from the PVV – especially its leader Geert Wilders – have used this frame since the party's inception. For Wilders, it takes courage to flout political correctness and speak honestly about the real problems facing Dutch society – from the dangers posed by Islam to the monstrous despotism of the EU.

Examples:

"We must speak frankly to those people, too, who come over as guests of other states. We must tell them to respect the citizens of their host states and not enter their homes illegally and perform acts unbecoming of a guest. They must be respected and they must be protected – in the words of those who speak of high principles – but we must also consider the victims of their crimes: the other honest citizens of the European Union who, perhaps with good reason, do not always enjoy having the Roma as their neighbours."

"These are the uncomfortable facts that the majority of citizens and people think and that certain do-gooders do not have the courage to admit, because, the truth is, sometimes you also have to have the political courage to say ..." – Mario Borghezio MEP, Lega Nord³⁵

"Mr President, on the eve of World War I, the British Minister, Sir Edward Grey, spoke these words: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time'. We have before us the Polledo report on the political priorities of the European Parliament for the post-2013 period. This concerns both the legislation and the budget. This is therefore the vision of the EU on the future of European citizens..."

"Let me make it clear: a right-thinking Member State such as the Netherlands will never be able to agree with this report. MEPs with a fresh, freedom-loving vision should throw this report straight in the bin. Why? Because, otherwise, the lamps will go out in Europe and we will be paving the way for a dark future for our children. My group want the lamps to stay on in Europe and, therefore, we will vote wholeheartedly against the report." – Lucas Hartong MEP, PVV³⁶

Paradise Lost

Actors: the representatives of tradition – who long for something lost in the past – and the representatives of modernity – who have forgotten or even betrayed the ideal “Paradise Lost”.

Problem: The representatives of tradition want to bring back the Paradise Lost, while the representatives of modernity are engulfed in what is depicted as a meaningless rush towards a soulless future.

Solution: bring back the Paradise Lost

The frame activates the following values: Respect for Tradition, Sense of Belonging

How is the frame applied?

Populists tend to visualise the Paradise Lost as a stable and confident nation that has been broken down and reimagined by a series of out-of-touch policy-makers. They apply the frame to a number of different social challenges: whether it is down to rising crime, anti-social behaviour, immigration, EU directives or human rights legislation, modern society has trampled over the glories of past decades. The solution is to apply the same policies that worked then and that have since been disregarded by self-important, short-sighted politicians.

UKIP in particular is a regular user of this frame. For UKIP, the Paradise Lost is an independent, more homogenous Britain – the UK’s membership of the EU, the acceleration of immigration to Britain, and the liberal, modernising politics introduced by New Labour and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition have transformed the country. Modern politicians have forgotten the Paradise Lost – some are too young to have seen it – but UKIP wants to bring it back: leave the EU, reduce immigration, stop multiculturalism, and turf out career politicians.

Examples:

“In scores of our cities and market towns, this country in a short space of time has frankly become unrecognisable ... Whether it is the impact on local schools and hospitals, whether it is the fact in many parts of England you don’t hear English spoken any more. This is not the kind of community we want to leave to our children and grandchildren” – Nigel Farage MEP, UKIP³⁷

“In our glorious history, millions have died to ensure that our country remains free. Today, we are simply allowing our right to self-determination to be stolen from us.” – Marine Le Pen MEP, Front National³⁸

Reinstating Common Sense

Actors: the bookish, disconnected professional politicians vs the down-to-earth, practical real representatives of the people.

Problem: the professional politicians are in charge. Their ideas border on the absurd but are nevertheless being implemented to disastrous effect. They have subverted the natural order of things, because they have no appreciation of nature, “real life” or the heartland.

Solution: we need to listen to the non-professional politicians who have other forms of experience – they are in touch with reality and can find the way out of the mess the politicians have gotten us into.

The frame activates the following values: Natural Order, Competency

How is the frame applied?

Populists apply this frame with a range of different political actors in mind. A common target is the EU. For populists, EU politicians in the Commission and the Parliament are the exemplar of the disconnected professionals, surrounded by uncaring bureaucracy and unaware of the outside world. Many populists believe it is their job to stir up the Parliament and inject some common sense into MEPs.

While many populists use “**Reinstating common sense**”, the frame is not limited to parties that have remained outside of government. Both the Lega Nord and the FPÖ have been part of coalition governments but employ the frame regularly. As with other populists, the Lega Nord has drawn an opposition between right-thinking, humble Northern Italians and the corrupt, technocratic political class in both Rome and Brussels.

Similarly, the FPÖ uses this frame on issues ranging from the EU to immigration, contrasting political elites with the ordinary people whom they claim to represent. Particularly fertile ground here is the subject of immigration. According to the FPÖ,

elite-driven policy-making on immigration is becoming more and more absurd, far removed from the immediate concerns of “ordinary people”. Only the FPÖ can restore common sense to Austria’s immigration policy.

Examples:

“We’re talking about the year 2006. All politicians have resigned themselves to the dominant government...All politicians? No, there’s one from a non-compliant party, the FPÖ, who keeps on resisting. I’m HC, a representative of the people...”

– *Austria First (HC Rap), Heinz-Christian Strache, FPÖ*³⁹

“[Europe may have] taken away the people’s identity, currency, and sovereignty, but not their common sense” – Roberto Calderoli, senator, Lega Nord⁴⁰

Order versus chaos

Actors: the people who long for order and stability and the bringers of chaos and uncertainty.

Problem: the bringers of chaos have undermined order, destroyed the social fabric, and wreaked havoc on people’s lives.

Solution: return to a state of order.

The frame activates the following values: Control, Order, Solidarity

How is the frame applied?

Populists tend to portray the policies of mainstream actors as encouraging chaos. They accuse the mainstream of neglecting a set of grievances – particularly with respect to immigration, crime and Islam – that have fundamentally disrupted the social order. Since the onset of the Eurozone crisis, populists have attempted to depict themselves as the bringers of certainty and solidity in an age of perilous economic and political transition.

The “Order versus chaos” frame is often used by the Front National. Their prime application is immigration: a prior age of order, simplicity and homogeneity has become fundamentally disrupted by agents of chaos. These actors, including national and EU politicians and big business, have undermined the social order. Working

people, who desire order and fear “insecurity”, face on-going social fragmentation and instability, including the weakening of the welfare state and of French identity. To reverse this disaster, immigration needs to be reduced and priority needs to be given to French nationals.

Tied in with this frame is the metaphor of the nation as a family. As cognitive linguist George Lakoff explores in his book *The Political Mind*, the family is a recurring source of metaphors in US politics for both the left and the right. As Lakoff argues, both conservatives and liberals project their own versions of the ideal family (the “strict father” model for conservatives and the “nurturant parent” model for liberals) onto the country’s different governing institutions. For the FN in France, the family represents security, stability, and strong social ties. The metaphor of the nation as a family consequently evokes feelings of order and solidity; immigration threatens to disrupt these familial bonds. The first of the following examples illustrates Le Pen’s use of the family and the “order versus chaos” frame.

Examples:

“Putting a stop to immigration is of urgent social need. Solidarity does not just happen. Solidarity is a sentiment that can only exist as long as there is a community of values, a common cultural base, within which everyone recognizes him or herself. And ever since our societies have been organized as nations, the nation is the natural framework for the exercise of solidarity. Social security, our whole system of social protection, our consent to pay taxes rest on this principle. The only reason we are willing to pay for each other, to insure each other against the risks of life, to protect each other is that we recognize that we are of the same family. And this family is France (...). [M]ass immigration carries with it the seeds of the destruction of our national solidarity.”

– Marine Le Pen, Front National⁴¹

“Mr President, we need to recognise that the removal of border controls has not just brought us advantages, such as convenient travel. These open borders have also naturally resulted in illegal immigration, while also making it child’s play for international criminal organisations to operate throughout Europe. You will all be aware of the undesirable side-effects: homes have been burgled, houses stripped bare, cars stolen, people trafficked, while we in this House seem almost oblivious.”

– Franz Obermayr MEP, FPÖ⁴²

The relationship between the five populist frames

The power of the five populist frames discussed here does not just come from their individual use. When woven together, the populist frames reinforce one another, providing a web of apparently simple reasoning that can be frustratingly hard for opponents to debate. Overleaf we have illustrated how the five populist frames can be tied together in a tightly circular narrative.

...**The bearers of truth** - unlike the cowardly elite. We see a disaster coming, but there's nothing we can do because we are...

...**Ruled from above** - the rulers are trapped in a theoretical bubble with no experience of the real world. We need to...

...**Reinstate common sense** - our leaders used to have it in our...

...**Paradise Lost** - our country has changed and the social fabric has been destroyed. This is a battle between...

...**Order versus chaos** - where the stability of Europe is at stake. Yet we are the only ones who dare say this because we are...

4 Case studies: populism in action

The previous section explored the central frames that populists of different shapes and sizes use repeatedly in their discourse. In this section, we see these frames in action. Our four case studies from plenary debates in the seventh European Parliament focus on exchanges between populists from the parties discussed in Section 2 and other MEPs. We highlight the frames and language used, assess the response given, and give our own suggestions for successfully taking on populist discourse.

Roma Rights⁴³

In October 2013, the European Parliament debated the situation of the Roma people in Europe, discussing how to alleviate instances of extreme poverty and exclusion among the Roma community.

Case study one



Paul Nuttall (Europe of Freedom and Democracy):

Mr President, unlike many people in this Chamber I have actually been to a Roma camp in Bulgaria. That is me in a place called Fakulteta, which has up to 50 000 people living in slums in a square mile. And I saw conditions there of poverty and deprivation that one rarely sees outside sub-Saharan Africa. If I were forced to live like this, and you were forced to live this, you would seize any chance to leave, and that is what many will do on 1 January next year and many will be headed to the UK.

Some are coming to do honest work, we know that, but some will not. Sadly there are gangmasters within the Roma community who force children to work as everything such as pickpockets and prostitutes [sic]. This is already happening in other European countries and in January it will happen in the UK as well. So, centuries after social reformers in Britain stopped child prostitution and put a stop to Dickensian pickpocket gangs, the EU will foist them upon us once again.

There will be a backlash, trust me, and our government will not and cannot do anything about it because of the European Union's laws. The best way, I believe, to help these people is not to export them round Europe: it is for their own national governments to do what our people did a long time ago and take the fight to child abusers who force them to work as career criminals.

Nuttall begins his intervention by referring to his real-life experience of meeting Roma communities. This is an example of the “Reinstating common sense” frame in action. Nuttall holds up a picture of his experience in Bulgaria, literally showing the other MEPs that for him the situation of the Roma is not a theoretical, academic question. It is something that he has grappled with on the ground. Nuttall also emphasises his empathy with the Roma by identifying with them (“if I were forced to live like this...”) and by encouraging the other MEPs to identify with them. This is aimed at pre-empting the accusation that he does not care about Roma. The message he conveys is: I do care, more than you could appreciate, because I have been there in reality, as opposed to having just compiled academic reports. Later, this opening allows Nuttall to tell the supposed hard truth about Roma criminals, giving him a “reputational shield” against claims of xenophobia or anti-Roma sentiment.⁴⁴

In the second part of his speech, Nuttall shifts tone. He begins to use the “Bearers of truth” frame, fulfilling the role of a “truth-teller” warning the Parliament of a great impending disaster – in this case the consequences of lifting the restrictions on free movement of labour from Bulgaria and Romania on January 1, 2014. He repeatedly mentions the date of the change in rules. This creates the impression of a sharp cut-off, a point of no return, requiring urgent attention. As with other instances of the frame, Nuttall portrays himself as an innocent observer, aware of a dangerous but inevitable “backlash” and desperate to wake the slumbering MEPs, who have no idea of what approaches.

Combined with this frame are two others that play a smaller role: “Ruled from above” and “Paradise Lost”. Nuttall argues that “the EU will foist” Roma criminals on the British. Here he uses the “Ruled from above” frame, identifying the EU as the rulers and the British public as the ruled. And in combination with this frame, he talks of the historical reforms Britain made to tackle child prostitution and pickpocketing, suggesting that the British “paradise” of low crime is at risk of being lost.

In fact, Nuttall makes the historical comparison for a second reason. By conjuring up an image of a “Dickensian” past, before reforms had been introduced, Nuttall positions himself on the side of progress. This is an attempt to co-opt the language of progress and modernity to pre-empt the critique that he is stuck in the past. It is the EU, not UKIP, Nuttall contends, that wants to take British society backwards.

Corina Crețu (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats):

My question was: what is your basis when you speak about such an apocalyptic idea, referring to the 1st January 2014? It is the obligation of all the European countries to lift the restrictions on the labour market for Romanian and Bulgarian labourers. And I think this political, or even populist, position towards this obligation, on the part of the United Kingdom amongst other Member States, is counterproductive for the European Union.

Suggested Response:

Rather than challenging Nuttall's "**Ruled from above**" frame, Crețu accepts the frame and operates inside it, emphasising that the UK has an "obligation" to drop the temporary restrictions. Crețu also uses the word "apocalyptic", sarcastically repeating Nuttall's warning about the change in labour restrictions. Crețu needs to address Nuttall more directly – she refers to Nuttall as "populist" but never really attacks his fundamental message. A different response would take on Nuttall's claim that he has "real-life experience":

"Are we now supposed to believe that overnight Mr Nuttall has developed a deep passion for Roma issues? Mr Nuttall, members of this Parliament have been working on these issues for years – we have been to the camps, we have seen the challenges Roma people face, and we have grappled with the policy dilemmas. So let's get serious and try to address these problems. And yes, you're right, that does mean that national governments have a responsibility – but rather than lecturing other countries, Mr Nuttall, why don't you try to help?"

Paul Nuttall (Europe of Freedom and Democracy)

Of course I think this obligation is completely wrong. We have 22 % of our own young people in the UK out of work. That is a million people unemployed. All that will happen when we open up the borders on 1 January 2014 to 29 million more people is that they will saturate the job market. It is about economics, it is nothing to do with racism and, quite frankly, we are only a small island and we cannot cope as it is.

Nuttall has no trouble in clearly stating he disagrees with the "obligation", using the word again because he knows that it evokes his characterisation of the EU as anti-democratic and dictatorial. Sensing hostility, Nuttall responds by insisting that his concern has "nothing to do with racism", a regular refrain by populists who are often sensitive to the critique that they are intolerant of other ethnicities and nationalities. Nuttall ends his speech with a phrase that has significant emotional resonance – by saying "we cannot cope" he evokes a sense of deep personal anxiety and frustration. "We cannot cope" is something a family might say if they are struggling to pay the bills or if they are reeling from a personal tragedy; by using the phrase in the context of a national political issue, Nuttall marries together this emotional distress signal with his wider political vision.

Posting of workers⁴⁵

In April 2014, the European Parliament passed legislation to improve the rights of posted workers (employees working within the EU who are sent by their employers to temporarily do their work in another EU Member State). One of the aims of the legislation was to address "social dumping" (when local businesses find themselves undercut by companies from countries with weaker labour regulations),⁴⁶ something that Marine Le Pen has often highlighted as a major issue for French workers. The legislation reformed the 1996 Posting of Workers Directive. At a plenary debate on the legislation, Marine Le Pen addressed other MEPs.

Case
study
two

Marine Le Pen (non-attached):

Mr President, in the run-up to a likely outcry against Brussels in a few weeks, the frightened advocates of the European framework are attempting to show a different face by strengthening the directive on the posting of workers, the most potent symbol of this ultra-liberal and antisocial Europe that the people no longer want.

Adopted in 1996 under the guise of improving the freedom and protection of European workers, the directive on the posting of workers has become within a few years the most powerful means of aligning wages in Europe with the lowest salaries and of implementing social dumping.

Over the years, we helped the flood of low-cost workers into our countries. According to the statistics, they will amount to more than 500,000 – in France alone – in a country, which, I reiterate, has over 5 million unemployed people. Faced with this organised unfair competition, local businesses have no other option but to import low cost workers or vanish. In my region, on the methane terminal at the Dunkirk site, no less than 40% of employees are low cost workers. They amount to so many that the administration in charge of work controls is no longer in a position to verify whether these workers have a job contract or whether they are working on the black market.

To try and absolve yourselves from your tragic errors, you seek to marginally amend this text – a crime against the dignity and wellbeing of employees – by allowing states to strengthen controls. How laughable and hypocritical! When, at the same time, you demand that States suppress whole areas of their administration to save the euro.

”

I have said it and I will solemnly say it again: strengthened or not, the directive on the posting of workers is a terrifying social dislocation time-bomb. There is only one solution: this text must be suppressed.

This is why we will abstain from the compromise amendment, a real piece of political trickery.

Le Pen begins her speech with a clear attempt to reframe the issue of posted workers to her advantage. She does this by telling a story, embarking on a historical account of the Posting of Workers Directive and its effects. By going back to 1996, Le Pen makes her mark on this issue; rather than getting straight into policy details, she sets the stage for her own critique. Throughout this story, the European Union and its representatives are portrayed as devious and opportunistic. They are the professional politicians of the “Reinstating common sense” frame, combining callousness (with no interest in the “wellbeing of employees”), naivety (their “tragic errors”), insincerity (“how laughable and hypocritical!”), and political clumsiness (hence their ham-fisted attempt to address people’s concerns weeks before the European Parliament elections). On the other hand, Le Pen depicts herself as someone who has direct, practical experience. She has been to the methane terminal in Dunkirk and has experienced firsthand the people in the her heartland suffering under the hands of EU legislators. Le Pen’s insinuation is: you have not seen the pain that immigration has caused; as a consequence, you have no democratic legitimacy.

Towards the end of Le Pen’s speech, she also makes a striking use of the “Order vs Chaos” frame. Le Pen describes the Posting of Workers Directive as a “terrifying social dislocation time- bomb”. The metaphor of a bomb associates the directive with terror, violent destruction, and chaos. Bombs physically devastate and disrupt; the EU’s policies accordingly tear at the social fabric. Le Pen’s underlying message here is not just an economic one, about the threat of immigration to jobs and wages. Immigration is portrayed as a phenomenon that undoes the social glue holding together French society. This is what allows Le Pen to describe the directive as a “crime against the dignity and wellbeing” of French workers.

The metaphorical use of the word “crime” brings with it the images and ideas that are normally associated with criminal acts. It indicates that in her view the French public have been morally violated; and that the criminals responsible – the politicians – must be punished for their crime. It further implies that the law, being a crime, is effectively illegitimate.

Marek Henryk Migalski (European Conservatives and Reformists):

You call this a criminal directive. Don’t you think that your fear of a flood of immigrants that want to work in your country is a manifestation of nationalism, protectionism and socialism. The richest country in the world, the most powerful country in the world, the United States, was formed in the main by immigrants. Shouldn’t you be concerned with how to make the French economy more open and liberal, rather than scaring your citizens about floods of people from Poland and other countries, who want to work, who don’t want to take your jobs but just want to work?

Marine Le Pen (non-attached):

Mr President, the United States was not founded by immigration but by colonisation and a very brutal colonisation at that, because they made the people they replaced disappear. That’s the first point already.

Secondly, yes, I do find it a crime against workers for them to be put in competition with other workers who are obviously paid 30 to 40% less than the pay advertised because of the level of social dumping.

So, evidently, sir, businesses will have a great time finding very cheap labour. When there are 5 million unemployed in a country, giving work to 500,000 people that come from abroad is not allowed. 500,000 today!

Suggested Response:

Migalski’s response to Le Pen is understandable and in earnest: his effort to show that Polish immigrants just “want to work” is laudable given the barrage of criticisms Poles have faced. But Migalski makes at least two important mistakes.

First, he plays into Le Pen’s hands by repeating her language (“criminal directive”) and by referring to the United States, a traditional target of FN censure. This allows Le Pen to reiterate her point that the directive is a “crime against workers” and portray him as in league with businesses rather than workers and the unemployed.

Second, he does not address the fundamentals of Le Pen’s critique – that the impact of a liberal immigration policy is not just about jobs but about the tearing of France’s social fabric. A stronger response would avoid Le Pen’s own frames and yet would take on her claim that immigration threatens social cohesion:

“Mr President, I am an optimist who believes in a strong, vibrant Europe. I believe that immigrants, whether they are planning to settle or are temporary workers, have a huge amount to contribute to strengthen our societies. I am no pessimist like Ms Le Pen, who has so little faith in her own country that she believes it will collapse with

more immigration. But where Le Pen and I agree is on the issue of social dumping: I too am concerned about a “race to the bottom” where workers lose out on fair wages. That is why it bemuses me that she will not vote in favour of this proposal, which aims to do something about just that! Why, Ms Le Pen, are you so adamant to not address a problem that you yourself have so often raised?”

Gender equality⁴⁷

To observe International Women’s Day on March 8, 2013, the EU held a debate on the impact of the economic crisis on gender equality and women’s rights, with a focus on the situation of women in North Africa

Case study three



Franz Obermayr (non-attached):

Mr President! The topic of equality will soon also concern us in the drafting of the law on boardroom quotas. But how do equality and boardroom quotas fit together from the perspective of an employer? Madam Commissioner, imagine you as the best qualified of a group of applicants don’t get the job, because you are a man. This is communicated to you in this way. The reason for your job rejection in this case would be your sex. Such an absurdity would be a possible everyday consequence of introducing boardroom quotas. Equality is not only about increasing numbers and statistics, but about the subjective perception of individuals in everyday life. Therefore, the described job rejection would be the opposite of equality. Men and women would not be equal. From my point of view, it would be more important to fight the very real injustice of unequal pay of women in professional life. That is where politicians would have a lot to do, unfortunately also in my native Austria.

Obermayr’s speech is an example of the “Reinstating common sense” frame in action. In this instance of the frame, professional politicians have devised a plan to introduce boardroom quotas – “an absurdity” – and the disastrous effects of the policy lead to “the opposite of equality”. Boardroom quotas subvert the natural order of the job market, where employers can freely choose who they want to employ. As a result, employers are forced to forgo choosing some of the best-qualified applicants and thereby discriminate against men on the basis of their sex.

As we explain in our description of “Reinstating common sense”, this frame draws an opposition between the natural order of things and the absurd, artificial solutions imposed by professional politicians. In Obermayr’s speech, this is exemplified by his contrast of the “perception of individuals in everyday life” (signifying the FPÖ’s support of ordinary people and the natural order) and the “increasing numbers

and statistics” (signifying the narrow- minded bureaucracy of the political class). Moreover, Obermayr seeks to reclaim the value of “equality” for the FPÖ. The underlying message of the speech is that if only we listened to politicians like Obermayr, who are grounded in the experience of everyday life, we would really be fighting “the very real injustice of unequal pay of women”. So rather than wasting our time with boardroom quotas that create more inequality, the FPÖ and Obermayr truly stand on the side of women.

Finally, in highlighting what he believes are the disastrous and unequal effects of boardroom quotas, Obermayr characterises the drafters of the law as interfering outsiders who threaten Austria’s capacity to decide its own labour policy, as well as the autonomy of Austrian businesses. In doing so, Obermayr reinforces the values of autonomy and self-direction, key elements of FPÖ ideology.

Lena Kolarska-Bobińska (European People’s Party):

Where do you see these quotas for management positions in companies? They do not exist; we are fighting for them. We are trying to implement this, but I do not think that there are many quotas in place. Perhaps there are isolated cases, but it is not systematic. I do not think that men are being persecuted in that sense.

Franz Obermayr (non-attached):

Mr President! First I would like to thank you for the question, and perhaps also for the opportunity for a clarification. I clearly said that this is problematic. I cannot imagine that the criteria is solely statistics and numbers, but that qualifications must also be considered. And to notice someone only because he is a man or she is a woman, I find unfair. Besides, in some countries there are, of course, other ways to get into the boardroom, either by appointment or by election. This too would create problems in some countries due to their legal structures.

Kolarska-Bobińska first responds by correcting Obermayr. She claims that he cannot show that quotas create inequality because these quotas have not yet been implemented. Soon after, however, she contradicts herself by saying that there may be isolated cases where quotas are in place. She then negates Obermayr’s argument by straightforwardly denying that “men are being persecuted” by interfering politicians. Kolarska-Bobińska does not spend time developing an alternative frame. She simply states her opinion – saying that she does “not think” that men are persecuted.

In his response Obermayr ignores Kolarska-Bobińska’s straightforward denial. He uses Kolarska-Bobińska’s concession that quotas may exist at least in isolated cases to clarify that the quotas she refers to are indeed “problematic” and to reinforce the point he made in his earlier speech: quotas are “unfair” and the current system of appointments or elections in the boardroom provides enough opportunities for both men and women.

Suggested Response:

This exchange shows that it is not enough to simply deny Obermayr's reasoning. The danger with straightforward denial is that by negating Obermayr's language – by saying that men are not being “persecuted” – Kolarska-Bobińska ends up reinforcing it. His frames need to be tackled with new ones – particularly the “Reinstating common sense” frame, which Obermayr uses most often in this case study.

This is our suggested response:

“Mr Obermayr, many of the best and most qualified candidates for boardroom positions are women. The reason they are rejected is indeed their sex. The system in place overwhelmingly discriminates against them. All you have to do is look at the composition of the boardrooms of the biggest publicly listed companies in the EU. More than 80 per cent of members are men. This is not acceptable.

Is this fair to you, Mr. Obermayr? What are the everyday consequences of this? It's that the best candidates who happen to be women are not being appointed or elected just because of their sex. Not the other way around.

We can't let the way in which things were done in the past dictate our present-day policy for equality for men and women. We need to take action to increase the participation of woman in boardrooms and combat gender stereotypes. We will all benefit. Qualified women on boards will benefit. Companies will benefit. And our whole economy will benefit. If we take gender equality seriously we need to reduce the negative impact of the economic crisis on women and give Europe a better chance of recovery.”

Discriminatory Internet sites⁴⁸

In 2012, the PVV launched a website, “Hotline for Reporting Central and Eastern Europeans”, encouraging people in the Netherlands to anonymously comment on their negative experiences involving Eastern Europeans, highlighting things like noise pollution, drunkenness, and losing out on jobs.⁴⁹ After widespread condemnation, the European Parliament decided to hold a debate to discuss the website.

Case study four



Auke Zijlstra (non-attached):

Madam President, eight years ago, no fewer than 12 countries joined the European Union. Everyone knew then only too well that those countries were not ready to join. The ambition was to create not a stable EU, but, first and foremost, a large EU. The accession requirements were simply relaxed.

The consequence of that is that already three hundred thousand people from Central and Eastern Europe have moved to the Netherlands. The reality is that the sheer numbers of these people are causing major problems in terms of housing, employment, education and social security. Unfortunately, this has also been accompanied by a large increase in crime and a massive burden on our society.

Yes, Madam President, this is the reality, one we have found out about through the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV)'s website, which has already received more than a hundred thousand complaints.

The Brussels elite is partly responsible for the relocation of crime to the Netherlands, and the overburdening of services that this entails, because of its open-borders policy. The free movement of persons, yes, but this has also been accompanied by the free movement of crime and the concomitant social burden. The Dutch are bothered by it and have had enough. And they are not alone. France is having the same problems and now even the French President, Sarkozy, is threatening to suspend French membership of the Schengen area.

Meanwhile, Madam President, we are having a plenary debate here, but not about the problems, as our citizens would expect. No, we are having a debate about PVV's website which is trying to map those problems. This is a world turned upside down. This Parliament is sweeping the problems under the carpet, this Parliament – including its President – does not want to know the facts. We are listening to our citizens. It is you, not we, who are walking away from the problems!

The Brussels elite in the Commission and Parliament sees only the European dream, when, in reality, it appears to be turning into a nightmare, like a bubble bursting, but they do not actually want to know anything about this. They are like squabbling children who are throwing a tantrum now that there are no more presents to open. They can now shed their mask of moral superiority because our citizens have seen through it. Madam President, it is time that this Parliament was abolished.

Zijlstra's opening speech offers a real masterclass in populist positioning. Zijlstra transforms the debate about the PVV's discriminatory website into one on the more comfortable territory of EU immigration policy. He begins his speech by turning the clock back eight years to the A8 accession, nullifying the previous discussion as centred on the symptom of the problem, not its root cause.

At the core of Zijlstra's speech is the “Bearers of Truth” frame: cowardly politicians allergic to the inconvenient truth vs the courageous PVV, whose website is not a vessel for intolerance but a symbol of its willingness to confront naked reality. The

“Brussels elite” is naive, irresponsible, and fundamentally oblivious; the PVV is both electronically and emotionally connected to the pulsating concerns of Dutch citizens.

Zijlstra’s simile “like squabbling children” is instructive. According to this, EU policy-makers are not only naive and irresponsible. They are also fundamentally incompetent, the beneficiaries of a convenient set of circumstances that allowed their short-sightedness to be overlooked for eight years despite the sheer recklessness of the enlargement plan. It is this brutal assessment of MEPs’ irredeemability that paves the way for Zijlstra’s uncompromising conclusion: the only solution for an institution so juvenile is total abolition.

In his references to “a world turned upside down” and “the free movement of crime”, Zijlstra also makes use of the “Order vs chaos” frame in his speech. The former phrase is meant as a reference to the wrongheaded circumstances of the debate that, for Zijlstra, is a disturbing case of shooting the messenger. But it also functions as a depiction of the unstable, nightmarish Europe that the EU has foisted on its citizens. The latter phrase – “the free movement of crime” – again paints a picture of a lawless, anarchic continent, in desperate need of the PVV’s steadying hand.

Ria Oomen-Ruijten (European People’s Party):

Madam President, a question: does the honourable member know what Poland’s growth figures are and would it not be a splendid thing if the Netherlands achieved such a high level of growth, too? And do you know any people in your neighbourhood who can say that they have never had a Polish worker provide a service for them? Can you confirm that?

And is it not the case that the Netherlands has achieved its prosperity because it has been an open country? Is it not the case, Madam President, that the Polish workers are making an important contribution to our open economy and that those same Polish workers are paying taxes and social security contributions and that, therefore, under law, they are also accruing rights, and that they are not entitled to benefits. You know that. You ought to know it.

Auke Zijlstra:

Ms Oomen-Ruijten, your assertion that Central and Eastern Europeans have no entitlement to benefits is blatant nonsense. At present, a total of over 12 000 of these people in the Netherlands are in receipt of benefits and that is a tenfold increase on a few years ago.

Why has the Netherlands become rich, you ask? The Netherlands has become rich thanks to hard-working Dutch people, the Dutch men and women who have put their country on the map. You are now leaving these very Dutch people in the lurch

by talking only about the impact of individual migrant workers and by failing to discuss the problems I have raised here, ones which councillors in big cities have also witnessed, namely, in the fields of housing, employment, education and social security.

Oomen-Ruijten’s response to Zijlstra’s speech is to promote the economic benefits accrued by open immigration policies. It is right to focus on reframing the debate onto rosier territory – this, after all, is exactly what Zijlstra did in his initial speech. But Oomen-Ruijten’s focus on economic growth depersonalises the debate and fails to make an emotional case for freedom of movement. As a Dutch native, Oomen-Ruijten misses the opportunity to draw on her own intimate awareness of the Dutch public’s grievances. In response, Zijlstra identifies a set of bread-and-butter concerns he believes are associated with immigration and positions himself as the defender of the Dutch people against the EU’s empty-hearted, statistics-infused bureaucracy, dehumanising his opponent.

Suggested response

*Oomen-Ruijten needs to find a response to Zijlstra that challenges his overarching story of the short-sightedness of EU enlargement and freedom of movement. But she also has to be careful to avoid playing the role of the naive politician in his “**Bearers of Truth**” frame in order to ensure that she does not unwittingly reinforce his message. She needs to show that she is both attentive to people’s concerns yet ready to outline her own vision of the EU’s immigration policy and the PVV’s controversial website. We suggest the following:*

“Not so long ago, Mr Zijlstra, as you well know, Europe was divided. But eight years ago, ten new members joined the European Union. The larger EU has been a success. Because of it, Europe is more united, more peaceful, and more economically vibrant.

Now part of the deal of membership is to enjoy the benefits of free movement. This movement has been significant and for some it has been unsettling and disruptive. This is the harsh reality. To address these concerns, it is vital to seek out and stop people who want to take advantage of the system, who want to commit crimes or who aren’t interested in contributing to society.

But, Mr Zijlstra, can’t you see that the way your party addresses this issue is only making things worse? I have colleagues, friends who have come to the Netherlands from Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, who work hard, who are kind and loving people, and who have contributed so much to our country – what are they supposed to think when they see your website telling people to write down everything they don’t like about Eastern Europeans? What do you say to them?”

5 Appendix: Counterpoint's guide to populism

This publication is a guide to understanding and responding to the rhetoric of populist politicians. But populists come in a different shapes and sizes. While there is a core set of ideas that holds these parties together,⁵⁰ they vary wildly on many measures. A common mistake when dealing with populism is to tarnish the more moderate parties with the brush of far right extremism. When a derogatory epithet is inappropriate, it riles the party's support base and reinforces its rebel status. In this appendix, we provide a chart for distinguishing some of the most well-known populist parties. For each party, we have devised a set of dimensions that we think are crucial in evaluating the threat it poses. We have used a traffic light system for each dimension to measure the threat.

Three key messages emerge. First, these parties differ wildly: some are far more toxic than others.

Second, despite these differences, nearly all the parties we have included have their problems. Only some are anti-democratic, racist and xenophobic. But nearly all have difficulties making constructive democratic contributions to the political system. They have been effective at being parties of "no", but that's not what a democratic system is about; to be a legitimate part of a democratic system you need to be willing to compromise, articulate solutions and aggregate preferences: do these parties have an interest in using the power that marginalised voters give them to do more than vocalise grievances? It is also for these reasons that we are – and should be – wary of their presence in our political landscapes.

Third, this guide may indicate how these different parties should be dealt with. There is little mileage in treating the more extreme parties in our guide as legitimate political forces. They are only intent on disruption and division, and in some cases, violence. But what do we do about those parties with deeply objectionable roots that have shown a willingness to change superficially or tactically, and are busy persuading voters that they are legitimate? How do we deal with them? For a party like the FN, given its roots and background, it would take a clean break: would the French FN publicly and formally break with its roots (in the way that the Italian neo-fascists of the MSI did when they became the National Alliance)? Would they be willing to turn away potential members with hard-line views to justify their claims that they are no longer a party of the far right? Such actions could be a both a litmus test of authenticity as well as a way of distinguishing parties we just don't like from parties that are dangerous to democracy.

Party	Country	Violent?	Hostile to representative democracy?	Extremist past?	Racist?	Xenophobic?	Islamophobic?	Anti-Semitic?	Homophobic?	Sexist?	Political contribution?	Direction?
Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn)	Greece	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Jobbik	Hungary	High	High	High	High	High	Low	High	High	High	High	High
Ataka (Attack)	Bulgaria	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
British National Party	UK	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party)	Austria	Low	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Slovenská Národná Strana (Slovak National Party)	Slovakia	Low	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest)	Belgium	Low	High	High	High	High	High	Low	High	High	High	High
Front National (National Front)	France	Low	High	High	High	High	High	Low	High	High	High	Low
Partij Voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)	The Netherlands	High	High	Low	High	High	High	Low	High	High	High	High
Lega Nord (Northern League)	Italy	High	High	Low	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats)	Sweden	High	High	High	High	High	High	Low	High	High	High	Low
Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party)	Denmark	High	High	Low	High	High	High	High	High	Low	High	High
United Kingdom Independence Party	UK	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party)	Finland	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party)	Norway	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)	Germany	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement)	Italy	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High

High danger

Medium danger

Low danger

Methodology

This matrix evaluates the level of danger that populist parties in Europe pose across an array of dimensions. Based on our research, we consider these dimensions as the most relevant in order to determine how dangerous these parties are. On each dimension, we have ranked the party as green (we evaluate the party as posing little to no danger on this dimension), amber (we evaluate the party as posing some danger on this dimension) or red (we evaluate the party as posing significant danger on this dimension). There is of course an element of subjectivity to the rankings. But by adopting a comparative perspective we hope to give a balanced appraisal of the populist parties we include in the matrix.

We have evaluated each party according to the behaviour of the leadership, not its rank-and-file members or its voters. For some parties, there are clear and well-known differences between the approach of the leadership and others within the party. In these cases, we have made a specific note to clarify these differences.

We have included parties that are considered both populist and a form of protest. We have not included mainstream parties in our study. (We have also included the Norwegian Progress Party in the study, despite Norway not being a member of the EU. We have done this in order to provide a comparison between the more moderate form of populism the Progress Party represents and the other parties in the study.)

Below we explain each dimension and give examples to show the differences between the red, amber and green categories.

Violent

Red – members of the party leadership are connected to violent acts (EXAMPLE: a Golden Dawn spokesperson attacked a Communist MP on live television. There have also been arrests of senior Golden Dawn politicians in connection with the murder of Pavlos Fyssas)

Amber – the party is connected with violent groups or party leaders have made comments encouraging violence, but there is little evidence that members of the party leadership are themselves violent (EXAMPLE: Jobbik is connected to banned paramilitary group Magyar Gárda, but party leaders have denounced violence)

Green – no evidence of violence within the party leadership (EXAMPLE: the leadership of the Sweden Democrats has rejected violence, despite the involvement of some of the party's politicians in violent acts)

Hostile to representative democracy

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party's values are not aligned with the tenets of representative democracy (EXAMPLE: senior politicians from Golden Dawn have praised Adolf Hitler and the party logo resembles a swastika.)

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party's values are not aligned with the tenets of representative democracy (EXAMPLE: The Front National has a history of holding hostile views towards representative democracy, advocating direct democracy and the use of referenda on most political issues, and overall calling for more exclusively majoritarian norms, including more movement-based politics rather than party political politics.)

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party's values are not aligned with the tenets of representative democracy (EXAMPLE: while UKIP has advocated referenda on certain issues, it has shown reverence for the UK's form of parliamentary democracy, including the important role of political parties.)

Extremist past

Red – there is clear evidence from the party's history that the party promoted (or promotes) values directly opposed to democracy and human rights (EXAMPLE: the Front National originated from extremist groups opposed to Algerian independence.)

Amber – there is mixed evidence from the party's history that the party promoted (or promotes) values directly opposed to democracy and human rights (EXAMPLE: the roots of the Slovak National Party (SNS) are in the campaign for Slovakian independence in the 1990s. It has had a chequered past, with a number of splits and changes in approach. But the SNS has claimed continuity with the historical Slovak National Party, which in turn had members connected to the Nazi regime in Slovakia, and the party has shown support for fascist leader Jozef Tiso)

Green – there is little or no evidence from the party's history that the party promoted (or promotes) values directly opposed to democracy and human rights (EXAMPLE: the PVV does not have an extremist past. Geert Wilders founded the party after leaving the centre right VVD over a disagreement on the question of Turkey's potential membership of the EU.)

Racist

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against people on the basis of race or ethnic group (EXAMPLE: despite efforts to conceal it, the British National Party is clearly a racist party – until recently it only allowed white members in its ranks, but was forced to drop its stipulation that members had to be “indigenous Caucasian”. The party has continued to make racist statements – for instance, wishing its members a “white Christmas” in a thinly veiled racist attack.)

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against people on the basis of race or ethnic group (EXAMPLE: PVV leader Geert Wilders recently caused controversy when he said he wanted “fewer Moroccans” in the Netherlands, but for the most part he has veered away from outright racism, arguing that he is only “intolerant of the intolerant”.)

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against people on the basis of race or ethnic group (EXAMPLE: the leadership of the Alternative für Deutschland have steered clear of racist remarks.)

Xenophobic

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of people deemed to be different (EXAMPLE: the Austrian Freedom Party has used slogans such as “Secure pensions instead of millions of Asylum Seekers”. Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache has told certain immigrants to “go back home”.)⁵¹

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of people deemed to be different (EXAMPLE: the Alternative for Germany has tread carefully on issues such as immigration and the EU. On the other hand, one of its slogans is “Immigration according to qualification, not into welfare”, compared by some to similar slogans used by the German neo-Nazi NPD.)⁵²

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of people deemed to be different (EXAMPLE: unlike other populist parties, the Five Star Movement has tended to avoid stoking fears around immigration, focusing instead on attacking corruption and the Italian political elite.)

Islamophobic

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of Muslims (EXAMPLE: the PVV advocates the banning of the Koran.)

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of Muslims (EXAMPLE: the Front National’s Marine Le Pen has made inflammatory statements about Muslims, but she has avoided the more extreme language of the PVV, preferring to couch her views in the context of French secular values.)

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of Muslims (EXAMPLE: there is little evidence of the leadership of the Five Star Movement discussing Islam or Muslims in a negative way.)

Anti-Semitic

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of Jews (EXAMPLE: Márton Gyöngyösi, Jobbik’s deputy parliamentary leader, in 2012 asked for a list of Jews in Hungary posing a “national security risk” to be created.)

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of Jews (EXAMPLE: Austrian Freedom Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache was at the centre of a scandal in 2012 when he posted a cartoon on his Facebook page that some argued could be interpreted as anti-Semitic. However, Strache has made attempts to renounce his party’s anti-Semitic past by showing support for Israel.)

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party stokes fears of Jews (EXAMPLE: Geert Wilders, leader of the PVV, has presented himself as an opponent of anti-Semitism and a firm supporter of Israel.)

Homophobic

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against gay people (EXAMPLE: Ataka leader Volen Siderov recently proposed an amendment calling for “public manifestations of homosexuality” to be punishable with imprisonment.)⁵³

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against gay people (EXAMPLE: the Sweden Democrats are opposed to gay adoption and gay marriage.)

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against gay people (EXAMPLE: The PVV is a supporter of gay marriage.)

Sexist

Red – there is clear evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against women (EXAMPLE: The BNP leadership has a history of sexist behaviour – in one instance, leader Nick Griffin made a misogynistic comment on Twitter about television chef Nigella Lawson.)⁵⁴

Amber – there is mixed evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against women (EXAMPLE: last year, Finns Party leader Timo Soini criticised the gender balance of the cabinet, arguing that the dominance of women demonstrated the Social Democrats’ failure to support working class men.⁵⁵ In response to claims of chauvinism, female party leaders argued that the party was not sexist.)

Green – there is little or no evidence – either from the party manifesto or comments by the party leadership – that the party discriminates against women (EXAMPLE: The Front National, under new female leader Marine Le Pen, shows little evidence of sexism.)

Political contribution

Red – the party makes little political contribution, attacking current policies but offering hardly any realistic reforms or solutions. It is a primarily destructive force (EXAMPLE: UKIP has failed to offer a clear political programme – leader Nigel Farage has rejected his party’s previous manifesto as “drivel”. UKIP MEPs do little to engage in policy work in the European Parliament, for the most part voting against any piece of legislation put to them, even those that are theoretically in line with the party’s values.)

Amber – the party makes a limited political contribution in some policy areas, but otherwise hampers and derails constructive debate (EXAMPLE: the AfD, known in Germany as the “party of professors”, has contributed an alternative perspective to the macroeconomics of the Eurozone crisis, but the party is divided over many key policy areas and its positive platform is unclear.)

Green – the party is a constructive political force that contributes to responsible policy-making and a healthy political debate (EXAMPLE: the Norwegian Progress Party is now close to being this kind of political actor since its entry into government with the Conservatives.)

Direction

Red – the party is transforming into a more radical and destructive political force (EXAMPLE: the PVV has radicalised over recent years, with Wilders’ language prompting defections from high-profile members.)

Amber – there is no clear evidence suggesting that the party is either becoming more moderate or more radical (EXAMPLE: the Austrian Freedom Party has made some attempts to present itself differently, but its efforts are not as extensive as Marine Le Pen’s “de-demonisation” campaign.)

Green – the party is transforming into a more moderate and serious political force (EXAMPLE: Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National, has made efforts to ‘de-demonise’ her party.)

6 Notes

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The European Parliament elections in May signalled a decisive shift in the political dynamics of this key institution. The significant increase in MEPs from a range of populist parties presents new challenges for the mainstream political groups, from working out how to engage with the new members of the European Parliament to developing a successful strategy for reaching out to those voters attracted to populist politics.

One of the greatest challenges is the captivating power of populist language. We intend this short publication to be a guide for politicians and campaigners who are searching for ways to respond effectively. The pamphlet comprises our analysis of populist rhetoric in the run-up to May's European elections, focusing on the discourse of five parties: the Front National in France, UKIP in the UK, the Lega Nord in Italy, the FPÖ in Austria, and the PVV in the Netherlands. We include specific frames and narratives used by populist MEPs, case studies from plenary debates, and examples of how to build responses and counter-arguments. For this pamphlet, we construct our examples from debates in the European Parliament – but we also hope that these exchanges can be a valuable resource for understanding the role of populism in the broader European context.