



European Economic and Social Committee

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

European Economic and Social Committee  
Comité économique et social européen

PUBLIC HEARING  
**Populism and Fundamental Rights: suburban and rural areas**

AUDITION PUBLIQUE  
**Populisme et les Droits Fondamentaux: zones périurbaines et rurales**

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The Study was commissioned by the **Diversity Europe Group of the EESC** and implemented by the **European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)** in the period July 2018 - January 2019





## Objectives and Regions

### Twofold Objective

- Understand the **factors influencing citizens' choices in favour of populism** in non-metropolitan areas and
- Insight into how **civil society organisations (CSOs)** operate to **counter populism** in view of recommending further civic actions

**Eight Regions in Four Countries:** different socio-economic characteristics but all with high populist vote:

- Klagenfurt-Villach and Niederösterreich-Süd in Austria
- Drôme and Aisne in France
- Udine and Reggio di Calabria in Italy
- Płocki and Nowosądecki in Poland



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## Research Methods

- Intensive **desk research**: studies of populism, social and economic data, public opinion polls, election results, CSO databases
- Two **statistical analyses** of the relationship between socioeconomic indicators and populist voting patterns on national and regional level
- An exploratory **citizen survey**: **616 citizens** from the regions shared their political, cultural and social concerns and outlined the issues that inform their voters' choices with a focus on populist parties
- **Three focus groups** with stakeholders, including CSO activists in the regions of Klagenfurt-Villach and Niederösterreich-Süd in Austria and Drôme in France
- **54 expert and CSO** in-depth interviews at local, national and European level



## Definition and Index of Populist Parties

*“a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté generale (general will) of the people”, Cas Mudde*

### Populism Index of selected parties in Austria, France, Italy and Poland

Country	Party	Dimensions, scores on a scale 1 to 10, low to high				
		Anti-elite	Majoritarian	Authoritarian	Monocultural	Eurosceptic
Austria	FPÖ	8.20	8.92	8.88	9.76	8.46
France	RN/FN	9.01	9.90	9.03	9.84	9.91
	La France Insoumise	9.05	3.85	3.19	3.39	7.87
Italy	M5S	9.89	5.95	5.11	6.13	7.34
	LN	8.06	7.00	9.10	9.67	9.07
	FI	4.32	6.06	7.66	7.25	4.27
	FdI	6.99	8.30	9.29	9.65	8.44
Poland	PiS	6.59	8.11	8.95	9.33	6.58
	Kukiz'15	8.95	7.70	8.67	9.02	6.39
	KORWiN	6.22	7.88	8.07	9.53	9.22

The Populism Index was constructed for the purposes of this study. It scores the parties along five dimensions on a scale 1 to 10, lowest to highest. The data used was the available from the Chapel Hill Political science expert Survey (CHES).



## Socioeconomic and cultural factors of populism

- Depending on the case, some factors are stronger than others and take precedence in driving populism. No factor alone causes populism - there is an interplay of factors, which feed on and reinforce each other.
- “Anxieties” and “fears” were often invoked by those interviewed to explain the rise of populism as populists employ a manipulation of popular fears as their main tactic.

E.g. “cultural insecurity” explains why the rise of populist political forces also exists in countries where the economic situation is quite good.

- Factors for populism may vary across different social groups: middle-income groups fear loss of status, while in lower income groups it is the more direct fear of loss of jobs and income.
- There are differences between the countries as well as between the different regions within the same country – “geography” matters.



## Additional Factors of Populism

- The *crisis of representative democracy* and the *diminished trust in traditional parties*. Consequently there is a demand for more *direct democracy* on behalf of citizens.
- *Strengths and weaknesses of populist parties*: good communicators in terms of instrumentally using fears and polarising society but they do not have actual solutions or viable plans for policies beyond their shallow rhetoric.
- *Online disinformation* is closely related to populism, and clearly contributing to its rise – populists make use of the advantages of social and online media to spread their messages.
- *Euroscepticism* has a strong relation to populism because populists find the EU a convenient enemy that they can blame with impunity (they command multiple communication channels and the EU has a poor communication strategy).

At a deeper level, the EU represents what the populists stand against - an everyday practice in liberal democracy and transnational cooperation.



# The role of civil society organisations in tackling populism

- Citizens and CSOs do not have clarity of the term “*populism*” and it *is not recognised as a distinctive type of challenge*.
- CSOs providing social services on behalf of the state/municipalities are well represented in all the regions and there are some examples of civic initiatives in support of migrants, and efforts to tackle online disinformation and support direct democracy. Euroscepticism is, by and large, not addressed, with the exception of Poland where support for the EU is high.
- The mapping of CSOs active in the areas of promoting EU values, civic education and engagement, civil liberties, direct democracy, support to minorities, refugees and migrants and tackling online misinformation, reveals *a marginal number of CSOs implementing activities that can potentially tackle populism*. The lowest percentage is in France (0.12% in Drôme of all registered CSOs in the region).



## Potentially relevant CSOs in the eight regions in focus

Country	Region	Total CSOs in the region	Potentially relevant CSOs in the regions							Total CSOs relevant	%
			EU values	Civic education and engagement	Disinformation	Minorities, migrants and multiculturalism	Civil liberties	Direct democracy and participation			
Austria	KV	4,488	7	2	1	39	0	5	51	1.14%	
	NO-S	3,035	1	0	0	5	0	2	7	0.23%	
France	DR	15,181	3	1	0	9	0	8	18	0.12%	
	AI	10,261	2	4	0	8	0	7	19	0.19%	
Italy	UD	4,494	5	4	1	12	0	0	21	0.47%	
	RC	2,433	2	8	0	14	0	1	23	0.95%	
Poland	PL	682	6	6	0	1	2	1	12	1.76%	
	NW	1,369	8	8	0	4	0	0	17	1.24%	

Some organisations are active in multiple areas, so the sum of the column of activities and total number at the end may differ.



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## The role of civil society organisations in tackling populism

*Encompassing and comprehensive civil society initiatives in tackling populism are lacking* due to the complexity of the phenomenon, the shrinking civic space, in terms of lack of an enabling environment for CSOs operation, limited human resources, reduced funding and lack of expertise.

There is a *need for civil society to be supported* in non-metropolitan regions in terms of resources, knowledge, expertise and know how in order to empower it to have capacity to play effectively its role of an intermediary between citizens and decision-makers in countering populism.



## 10 Recommendations to CSOs and other Stakeholders

- Develop a knowledge base on “populism” to inform a tailored approach to tackling its roots and manifestations
- Invest in formal and informal civic education
- Restore the public sphere of dialogue and discussion
- Support civil society at local level
- Provoke traditional parties to innovate and seek new solutions to citizens’ concerns exploited by populists
- Complement representative democracy with collaborative elements of participatory democracy
- Tackle online disinformation at all levels
- Strengthen the EU’s role and actions as guardian of EU values and democracy in the EU and in Member States
- Foster EU communication and engagement
- Boost internationalisation/Europeanisation through exchanges – horizontal, vertical and multi-stakeholder involving non-metropolitan areas



# Thank You for Your Attention!

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