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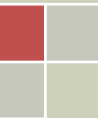
## **IKV BRIEF**

# **BREXIT, TRENDING POPULISM AND RADICAL MOVEMENTS: THE “NEXT BIG THING” IN EUROPE**

**Ahmet Ceran**  
***IKV Researcher***

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION**

[www.ikv.org.tr](http://www.ikv.org.tr)



## **BREXIT, TRENDING POPULISM AND RADICAL MOVEMENTS: THE “NEXT BIG THING” IN EUROPE**

**Ahmet CERAN, IKV Researcher**

Turkey hasn't been chasing the EU membership goal for more than a half decade long time despite all those obstacles encountered, just because it is a long-lasting old habit. The EU integration project has been and still is the most successful regional integration and global governance structure international system ever witnessed. This is the main reason behind Turkey's EU membership ambition. Since establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, the project aimed producing prosperity, stability and advanced individual rights. These values have been dependent to the transformative influence of interdependence and free movement (of goods, persons, services and capital). Nevertheless, as previously European prosperity was challenged by Euro Crisis; recently interdependence and free movement is being challenged by migration crisis and Brexit in an extreme manner. Combining with the rising populism and radical ideologies; the EU faces an existential debate for the first time. And Brexit referendum just rang the bell.

Britain voted to leave the EU on 23 June 2016 by 52% to 48% and it ended with Prime Minister David Cameron's replacement by former Home Secretary Theresa May. These surprising results caused an earthquake effect among both the Britons and the EU. One member of the Club of 28s for the first time decided to leave. Without question, this process would have fundamental short and long term effects for every single counterpart including Turkey and might lead to bigger challenges at all.

Biggest motive of who voted for Britain to leave the EU was immigration. Voters from poorer and less educated regions thought that migrants were stealing low skill jobs from them and putting overwhelming pressure on public services resulting lack of decent education and healthcare services for Britons. Therefore, people of Britain, mostly under the effect of rising populist rhetoric, intended to leave the EU by doing so reduce immigration mostly from Eastern Europe, set free from economic burden of the EU and regain enhanced social services. This was the main idea.

Yet, the withdrawal talks itself will constitute a daring challenge for both the EU and Britain because of political, legislative and economic ties of the two parties as well as the normative global power of the Britain. According to the EU law, Britain must trigger article 50 of TEU declaring the official exit request; from that moment, the parties will have two years long period of time to be in negotiations on an exit agreement which would be extended two years more. As most experts and scholars stress, the EU has the upper hands concerning the Brexit negotiations and will be pushing hard on Britain to



prevent other Member States consider leaving the EU. The EU would like to finish the negotiations before the EP elections in 2019.

Brexit negotiations and Brexit itself expose numbers of challenges. Firstly, position of Scotland and North Ireland that voted to remain stands critical. Both started looking for any possible way to be able to stay within the EU. Ignoring the concerns of Scotland and North Ireland would trigger bigger issues in the future. Secondly economic results and future of the trade relations between the EU and Britain are issues to be resolved. Many experts call that British economy moving through a recession in short term and since most probably there will not be a free movement of persons after Brexit, many finance and tech giants with Europe hubs in London started moving to other EU countries. Correlatively, Brexit will surely effect the gigantic trade negotiations such as TTIP, CETA since Britain have been a critical part of these deals. Future of the European trade system remains to be one of the greatest challenges of all. The EU would not let the Britons to stay within the Single Market without accepting all related EU *acquis* and free movement of persons. Yet Theresa May and her staff will need to find some other way around. As a sign of these difficult times, Bank of England published 2017 growth expectations. Growth of 0.8% is being expected for 2017 instead of previously forecasted 2.3%.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, most striking result of the Brexit referendum is a social and political one. During and just after the referendum, eurosceptic, populist and disintegration oriented narrative got more powerful than ever both in Britain and the EU. Anti-EU, popular figures in Britain such as Nigel Farage leader of Eurosceptic, right-wing populist party; populist and controversial politician Boris Johnson, recent Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary of State got publicly influential and powerful. This influence resulted in increased hate speech, xenophobia and anti-migration tone within many areas of Britain and heated up the eurosceptic, populist tone in other EU countries as well. Just after the referendum, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French far right political party Front National declared the results as the “most important moment since the fall of Berlin Wall”.<sup>2</sup>

## **Turbulent Times to Come**

Trending populism, euroscepticism and tendency towards radical ideologies aren't breaking news on the EU stage. 2014 EP elections presented a clear insight regarding the rise of populism concerning European polity. Populist parties achieved electoral success within 10 of the EU countries during EP elections in 2014. Considering 43%

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<sup>1</sup>Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska, “EU referendum: the beginning, not the end, of Brexiteers’ problems”, NUPI Policy Brief, 20/2016.

<sup>2</sup>“Marine Le Pen: Brexit ‘most important moment since Berlin Wall’”, POLITICO, 29.06.2016.



average participation to the 2014 elections, intensity of the euroscepticism could be observed better. Some of the populist electoral winners of 2014 seem familiar: SYRIZA in Greece, PODEMOS in Spain, UKIP in Britain, Front National in France etc.<sup>3</sup>

However, most importantly, those parties finally found their success story with Brexit. Populist, eurosceptic, conservative or radical parties started to call for referendums in the aim of “reproducing” Brexit referendum’s success all over the EU. According to a research conducted by ECFR, further 32 EU referendums are being proposed in 18 EU countries. Both France and Germany, two “big brothers” of the EU integration will be facing elections in 2017. Within both countries, mainstream political powers are not in an accelerating trend. In France, after a hypothetical win of Front National, challenging the EU without question would be the first thing Le Pen might do.

Besides, other driving forces of the EU, Italy and Spain also within a chaotic position. Italian populist, eurosceptic Five Star Movement’s recent victory in the local elections in the course of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s struggle with turbulent economy should be underlined while Spain has been failing to form a new government yet. Far right Freedom Party of Austria received 49% of votes in presidential elections. In Holland and Eastern European countries, anti-immigration narrative and criticism towards the EU’s migration policy is louder than ever.

### **How and Why Populism Ignited in the EU?**

Similar motives have been driving the populist, anti-EU, fragmentation and national sovereignty based discourse along all EU countries like Britain example. All dissenter parties are challenging the European social model asserting the loss of unskilled jobs and public services because of the “uber-elite” Brussels based hyper complicated structure and migrants. And they claim, those social gains must be taken back. The founding value of interdependence started to be considered as a dangerous element after the bombings in France and Belgium, migration crisis as well as instabilities in Ukraine and Turkey. Lastly, highly bureaucratic and multi-layered decision-making and governing methods of the EU institutions started to be considered inadequate overcoming those problems.

Two recent examples of these populist, radical expressions are critical in the upcoming era. Firstly, super star of the anti-immigration block, Prime Minister of Hungary, Victor Orban has been pushing on Brussels very hard concerning Migration Agenda as well as relocation plans of the Commission and boosting his charisma and influence over populist, nationalist, conservative circles in Eastern and Central Europe. Orban first

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<sup>3</sup>Manuel Kellner, *The Far Right in Europe*, Ed. Fred Leplat, Resistance Books, 2015, p.8.



came up and became an attention grabbing figure over European polity after the construction of massive fences on external borders to keep migrants out of Hungary. Starting from that moment, tone of Orbán's anti-immigration statements got more and more aggressive over time. Orbán found audiences not only in his country but also many EU countries including Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland and Austria. Most recently, Orbán initiated a referendum concerning the resettlement plans and migrant quota system of the EU. Even though turnout of the poll was extremely low (44.4%) and the result of the referendum was declared invalid, voters presented a clear stance as the majority voted against the EU's resettlement plans (98%). This situation gives a striking clue concerning possible problems and radical tendencies the EU and relatedly Turkey would face in the future when migration crisis put on the table.

Second incident which requires a special emphasis to put on is the current rule of law debates in Poland. Polish President Andrzej Duda has asserted a series of legislative amendments concerning the structure of Constitutional Tribunal, highest legal authority of Poland. Behind this attempt, surely stands the founding leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party, populist conservative Jarosław Kaczyński. Frans Timmermans, First Vice President of the Commission described the amendments as undermining independence and transparency of the Court. It would weaken the Court's ability to supervise and check the Polish government's actions. Therefore, the Commission gave the Polish government an official recommendation document explaining the required legislative reforms the Polish counterparts should consider. If the Polish government doesn't take the recommendations seriously, there is a possibility that Poland's voting rights would be suspended (Article 7 Procedure) within the EU decision making system. Yet, Polish side doesn't seem to be taking the Commission's actions serious; even deepening political relations with Viktor Orbán and other populist, Eurosceptic movements among the EU.

This leads to a much more critical challenge before the EU: accountability and efficiency problem in EU decision making and executive power. Recently main paradigm of the populist, nationalist, conservative, radical or socialist movements in the EU is based on challenging Brussels-centric supranational decision making within the EU institutions. National drives within most EU countries started to go over the general EU integration idea. New possible struggle ahead: national states against internationalism.

The EU institutions try overcoming this possible threat by enhancing and easing legislative process by initiating "better regulations" and making the decision making and legislative process as digital and transparent as possible. Yet this reform attempts don't seem successful considering the rapidly expanding nature of populism over the EU. Social media and digital means acted as a critical apparatus for populist or radical entities to find their counterparts fast and interactively through internet. By doing so, it



became possible to have a much broader repercussion in press and public opinion for radical, powerful and striking statements. In near future, after the national elections in many EU countries and during the Brexit negotiations, this would lead to more serious existential debates in the EU. At this point Turkey needs to position itself in a very intelligent way.

### **Differentiated Populism?**

Construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of populist rhetoric have become the new trend among the analysts, think-tankers, researchers and scholars in general. Chasing the core dynamics behind the ability of populist leaders to mobilise and influence the public opinion within the current global situation is widely general emphasized recently both in EU studies and international relations studies. Amazingly stimulating analysis being produced every single day on this issue. Some approaches relate the populism and radicalisation with economic drives; others with migration and social security problems; culture based causes and so forth. Yet it has been evident that it is not possible to impose one core dynamic to all cases being encountered in Europe. Every case should be analysed considering their own variables. This leads us to more difficult, more complicated to homologize, differentiated scenarios all over the continent.

The latest rejection of Austrian people a far-right candidate Norbert Hofer, for presidency as the result of the elections on 4 December and Hungarian citizens' extremely low interest concerning Orban's vital refugee referendum on 2 October shows the chequered nature of the phenomenon. Therefore in 2017 while evaluating many critical elections and national decisions to come all over Europe, stakeholders must stay cautious about the misleading assumptions and "case by case" approach should be in the tool box.

