Executive Summary

Right Response

Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe

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Executive Summary

Populist extremist parties (PEPs) present one of the most pressing challenges to European democracies. These parties share two core features: they fiercely oppose immigration and rising ethnic and cultural diversity; and they pursue a populist 'anti-establishment' strategy that attacks mainstream parties and is ambivalent if not hostile towards liberal representative democracy. These parties and their supporters remain poorly understood. What drives some citizens to abandon the mainstream in favour of populist extremists? What message are these parties offering, and how receptive are European electorates to this message? How, if at all, can mainstream parties counter the rise of PEPs? This report examines what is *causing* citizens across Europe to shift behind populist extremists, and how mainstream elites might *respond* to this challenge. It puts popular stereotypes to one side and adopts an objective and evidence-based approach to investigate the characteristics and concerns of PEP supporters, the message and the wider potential of populist extremism, and possible response strategies.

The challenge

Contrary to assumptions in the 1980s and 1990s that the emergence of PEPs in Europe would be nothing more than a flash in the pan, these parties continue to rally large and durable levels of support. They have joined national coalition governments. They have surfaced in countries with a tradition of extremist politics, as well as those that were previously thought immune. They emerged before the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the recent financial crisis. They have rallied support in some of the most economically secure and highly educated regions of Europe. Some have outlasted their 'charismatic' leaders, who were once held up as the principal reason for their success. In the process, PEPs have challenged mainstream parties on both the centre-right and centre-left. Some argue their rise has instigated a 'contagion from the right', by pushing moderate right-wing parties to adopt increasingly restrictive policies on immigration and integration. Others argue their rise has presented the centre-left with a 'triple challenge' by (a) helping the centre-right to form coalitions, (b) increasing the salience of social and cultural issues that tend to favour the right and (c) recruiting support from manual workers who traditionally supported the left.[1] When seen as a whole, these challenges underscore the need to examine the challenge from populist extremist parties more closely.

The supporters

Supporters of PEPs are often dismissed as political protestors, single-issue voters or economically deprived 'losers of globalization'. However, these stereotypes ignore a body of evidence on the characteristics and concerns of these citizens. PEPs are not 'catch-all' parties that appeal across society. Instead, their support is anchored heavily in specific social groups. The most successful parties have rallied a coalition of economically insecure lower-middle-class citizens and skilled and unskilled manual workers. Not all PEPs have assembled this coalition: some have failed and fallen dependent on a dwindling base of angry, working-class and poorly educated men. But all of their supporters share one core feature: their profound hostility towards immigration, multiculturalism and rising cultural and ethnic diversity. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that these citizens are motivated by feelings of economic competition from immigrants and

1   T. Bale, C. Green-Pedersen, A. Krouwel, K. R. Luther and N. Sitter (2010), 'If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them? Explaining Social Democratic Responses to the Challenge from the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe', *Political Studies,* 58, pp. 410–26.

minority groups, feelings of *cultural* threat are the most important driver of their support. For these citizens, the decisive motive is the feeling that immigration and rising diversity threaten their national culture, the unity of their national community and way of life. Much like other voters, citizens who support PEPs are not irrational. They are guided by clear and coherent goals: they want immigration reduced and rising diversity curtailed or halted altogether. They are deeply concerned about these issues, and profoundly dissatisfied with the current response offered by mainstream parties.

The wider potential

Populist extremist parties are offering a distinct set of ideas to citizens: the most important are their exclusionary policies with regard to immigrants and minority groups, and a populist 'anti-establishment' strategy that is targeted at mainstream parties and other institutions in society. PEPs frame minority groups (though increasingly Muslims) as posing an economic and mainly cultural threat to European societies. They also claim that mainstream parties are unable or unwilling to respond to this threat. Beyond these parties' actual voters, large sections of European electorates are potentially receptive to this message. This potential is evident in three areas: (1) public attitudes on immigration; (2) growing public hostility towards settled Muslim communities, and (3) public dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and their performance on immigration-related issues. While traditional and cruder forms of racial prejudice are in decline, hostility towards immigration remains relatively widespread. This hostility is driven less by economic grievances than by feelings of cultural threat: large numbers of citizens feel there are too many immigrants in their countries, perceive minority groups to be a burden on social services and are deeply anxious about the impact of these changes on their

national culture and community. For example, one study examining the factors that influence public attitudes on immigration finds that concerns over cultural unity are nine times more important than concerns about crime, and five times more important than concerns about the national economy.[2]

PEPs are increasingly linking this sense of cultural threat to *settled* Muslim communities, and there is evidence of significant public anxiety over the perceived difficulties in integrating this group into wider society. In some countries, PEPs are now performing more strongly in areas that are not simply more ethnically diverse, but that have large Muslim communities (while their support is *lower* in areas that have large numbers of non-Muslim Asians and other minority groups).[3] This suggests that anti-Muslim sentiment is becoming a key driver of support for these parties, and that simply talking about reducing the numbers of immigrants or tightening border security will no longer satisfy the modern PEP supporter. In short, there is considerable potential for parties that offer a combination of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim positions. This potential is underscored by the way in which large numbers of citizens in Europe are already dissatisfied with, and distrustful of, mainstream parties, and their performance on these issues.

The response

There is no uniform response to PEPs. But six potential response strategies do exist for mainstream parties: 'exclusion', 'defusing', 'adoption', 'principle', 'engagement' and 'interaction' offer different ways forward. Each strategy comes with risks, and their effectiveness will depend heavily on the respective national context. However, at a broad level the first four strategies go against the grain of the conclusions of this report. The last two – engagement and interaction – that are focused more heavily on the local arena offer the best prospects for progress.

2   E. Ivarsflaten (2005), 'Threatened by Diversity: Why Restrictive Asylum and Immigration Policies Appeal to Western Europeans', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 15(1), pp. 21–45.

3   For example R. Ford and M. J. Goodwin (2010), 'Angry White Men: Individual and Contextual Predictors of Support for the British National Party', *Political Studies,* 58(1), pp.1–25.

- *Exclusion* would see attempts to block PEPs from accessing public office and influencing debate. Yet there is little evidence to support the conventional wisdom that excluding populist extremists from debate and public office actually works. Rather, the opposite appears true: parties that are excluded tend to adopt more extreme ideological positions. Furthermore, the citizens who support PEPs already exhibit extremely high levels of political dissatisfaction, and are also more distrustful than other voters of mainstream politics. Enticing these voters back into the fold of mainstream politics will be difficult enough; excluding their chosen representatives is likely to make this impossible.

- Attempts to *defuse* the populist extremist message would see mainstream parties shift the focus onto issues on which they have a strategic advantage. This would see politicians play down social and cultural issues that tend to favour PEP challengers (e.g. immigration), and play up more traditional issues that tend to favour established parties (e.g. the economy). However, given the increased salience of immigration and integration in the minds of voters, this strategy is unsustainable. It might also have wider and profoundly negative consequences: the evidence suggests that when public concern over immigration goes unresolved then overall levels of public trust in political institutions – and the overall functioning of the political system – are undermined.

- *Adoption* would entail embracing more restrictive policies on immigration, integration and law and order. It is unlikely, however, that such a 'rightward turn' would satisfy the underlying concerns of those citizens who sympathize with the populist extremist message; and it might even compromise underlying traditions of tolerance and pluralism. Moreover, the strategy might well damage credibility, alienate core voters and inadvertently legitimize the campaigns of populist extremists. It is also distinctly unlikely that mainstream parties will be able to convince voters they can deliver a competent performance on these more divisive issues.

- The *principle* strategy would involve political debate with PEPs, but in a way that is consistent with the evidence on what is driving public concerns. Across Europe, mainstream parties have invested heavily in a narrative that emphasizes the economic case for immigration. Yet the evidence clearly demonstrates that this narrative is unlikely to satisfy the concerns and anxieties of modern PEP supporters, and those who are potentially receptive to these parties. Put simply, those who are most open to the message are unlikely to be won over by arguments that stress the economic benefits of immigration. Their concerns are driven more strongly by a belief that immigrants, culturally distinct Muslim communities and rising cultural diversity are having a profoundly negative impact on their national cultures, communities and ways of life. These citizens want a conversation about these threats, but at present only populist extremists appear to be talking to them. Mainstream elites need to go beyond making the economic case for immigration and begin making the case for cultural diversity.

- In contrast to the earlier strategies, *engagement* would require more serious investment in countering PEP campaigns at the grassroots. In recent years, the professionalization of politics has arguably left large numbers of voters feeling both disenfranchised and receptive to the populist anti-establishment message. The potential impact was best reflected in one local report, which found that some voters experienced more face-to-face contact with activists from PEPs than with activists from mainstream parties.[4] To win the hearts and minds of voters, mainstream parties should be part of the community, have an active and visible presence and forge stronger links to local groups and forums. In practical terms, this means standing full slates of candidates at the local level, engaging with voters face-to-face and redirecting some resources to revitalizing grassroots campaigns.

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4   JRCT (2004), *539 Voters' Views: A Voting Behaviour Study in Three Northern Towns* (York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust).

- Lastly, *interaction* would see much greater effort devoted to supporting contact and dialogue between different ethnic and cultural groups within a given community, though especially between members of the majority and minority Muslim communities. Rather than focusing on the dynamics of party competition, the key here would be to tackle head on the underlying concerns that are driving support for PEPs. This approach draws upon decades of research in social psychology that demonstrates how increasing levels of contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice, counter perceptions of threat and raise levels of tolerance. The strategy offers a way for mainstream political elites and other actors in society (such as voluntary and third-sector groups) to support communities to become more resistant to the populist extremist message.

PEPs have spent much of the past two decades exchanging strategies, ideas and best practice. This has enabled them to respond to new issues and events more innovatively and effectively than the established parties. Until the mainstream parties similarly begin to exchange lessons, root their responses in the evidence and address the actual anxieties of PEP voters, populist extremists will continue to rally support among a new generation of citizens. If politicians and policy-makers are to meet this challenge, they need to radically rethink their current approach to populist extremism.