
THE FUTURE OF MIGRATION POLICY IN A VOLATILE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

COUNCIL STATEMENT

By Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Natalia
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Executive Summary

A wave of support for nativist and populist parties and politicians who espouse such views has shaken the foundations of mainstream politics across the industrialized world. Although the electoral fortunes of these actors have ebbed and flowed—defying the predictions of pollsters and analysts at almost every turn—it is clear that populism (and particularly nativist populism)¹ has reached a tipping point and entered the political mainstream. Populist politicians have tapped into a sense of real and perceived loss and grievance among sections of the public roiled by the effects of globalization (and the growth in inequality it has spurred), labor-market volatility (and the workers it has left behind), rapid cultural shifts, and concerns about the long-term viability of the social-welfare model that has come to be viewed as a birthright of residents of wealthier societies. In short, they have harnessed waves of discontent that can be expected to continue to rattle political systems for years to come.

There has been much discussion about the influence of nativist populism on immigration policymaking in Europe. The emphasis has been on whether or not radical-right populists—most of whom tout an anti-immigration agenda—would prevail in national elections, and thus have a chance to translate their agendas into legislation that reduces immigration flows and restricts immigrants' access to different forms of social assistance. But this narrow focus on performance at the ballot box misses a larger point. Politicians with populist views have demonstrated an ability to exert indirect influence that transcends individual pieces of legislation or even individual governments—influence that may redraw the political landscape in Western democracies. They are increasingly setting the policy agenda and the tone of political rhetoric, and reshaping how members of the public view and respond to immigration issues. In addition, as a string of 2017–18 elections has shown, they are reshuffling power dynamics among established political parties; they have eroded support for the political center (and in many cases, eviscerated support for the left-of-center, as in France, Italy, and the Netherlands) that has long served as the backbone of Western European democracies.

Politicians with populist views have demonstrated an ability to exert indirect influence that transcends individual pieces of legislation.

While populism is nothing new, several forces have magnified its influence. These include the fragmentation of mainstream political parties that some voters have concluded no longer represent them or their core concerns, and the unfettered (and unvetted) spread of information and ideas through new media platforms, and the concomitant distrust of facts that has allowed new grievances to spread. From marches by the English Defence League in the United Kingdom and by Pegida in Germany, to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's attacks on institutions that espouse liberal values, and clashes over white supremacy and the symbolism of the Civil War-era Confederate flag in the United States, the symptoms of public discord run much deeper than what rises to the surface during elections. As opportunistic politicians whip up anxieties and seize on fear and discontent, the big questions are: where do U.S. and European societies go from here, and how should mainstream parties and actors respond to these developments?

The Migration Policy Institute's Transatlantic Council on Migration convened to discuss what this latest wave of right-wing populism portends for immigration policymaking, and how to rebuild a political

¹ This report uses the term “nativist populism” to refer to an ideology espoused by far-right and radical-right politicians and parties with a core opposition to immigration, whether driven by sociocultural, identity, ethno-religious, or labor-market and social-welfare concerns. These actors also typically share anti-establishment, anti-elite, and (in Europe) Euroskeptic views.



middle ground that many fear has been lost. Mainstream politicians face a sharp challenge to reclaim the narrative and forge a “new politics” that is demonstrably responsive to the interests of all. But the silver lining of “business as usual” having been upended is that everything is up for grabs. The Council debate highlighted five steps that established political actors can use to fashion a new consensus on immigration and gradually regain support that has been lost:

- 1. *Directly address all forms of immigration disorder in order to rebuild and maintain public trust.*** The willingness of an electorate to trust its politicians and governing institutions relies on migration-management systems that are transparent, robust, and fair. Successful systems also clearly articulate *and adhere to* rules that everyone can understand. This means that system integrity and enforcement of laws must be pursued firmly, while also respecting the rights and dignity of those who break the rules.
- 2. *Create new channels for publics to engage in policy decisions and voice legitimate grievances.*** Mainstream politicians must develop the listening skills to address the concerns of voters without either dismissing or whitewashing their grievances—and without shaming those who voice them. They must also create opportunities to speak frequently and clearly about immigration, for instance through public consultation and dialogue through trusted intermediaries. While these avenues may work better in smaller countries and with more engaged citizenries, it has become imperative to give people a sense of agency in decisions that affect their lives and local communities.
- 3. *Communicate complex policy decisions clearly without overpromising or stoking fears.*** It is clear that in the cacophony that surrounds immigration issues, facts alone will not win hearts and minds. It is equally clear that emotional rhetoric on immigration (or integration) issues can backfire by oversimplifying complex policies and alienating more moderate voters and minorities. Policymakers must walk as fine a line as there is in politics when trying to balance creating a positive narrative (without dismissing concerns) and tapping into discontent (without unduly stoking fears).
- 4. *Redress inequality by investing in communities.*** Mainstream politicians must acknowledge that certain segments of almost every society have been left behind. The recovery from the economic and fiscal crises of the past decade has been highly uneven, with some workers enjoying renewed prosperity while others continue to struggle to make ends meet. To begin to address this deep inequality and rectify (by now structural) disadvantages, governments need to work with the business sector to proactively invest in revitalizing smaller towns and rural areas in decline—targeting in particular workers with lower wages and more limited education who feel the costs of globalization and related socioeconomic changes most acutely, and helping them prepare for the jobs of the future.
- 5. *Employ a forward-looking, whole-of-society approach to integration.*** Demonstrating that newcomers are integrating well—both into the host-society labor force and the fabric of local communities—is at the heart of regaining public trust in immigration. Elected leaders need to confront the perception that immigrants benefit disproportionately from certain programs head on, including by designing and implementing services that benefit all members of society, and by clearly and transparently communicating policy goals and investments around integration.

Populism is both symptom and driver of the challenges facing many Western societies today. The sense of loss rooted in deep socioeconomic inequality and rapid cultural change has been allowed to fester and grow—creating fertile ground for radical-right voices to stir up public discontent. Governments need to learn from these mistakes and become much more proactive about managing societal divisions and providing a credible alternative to populism if they are to reclaim the middle ground.



I. Introduction

A string of successes for populists of all stripes have disrupted and are transforming politics in many Western societies. From near wins by right-wing, nationalist parties in France and the Netherlands; to surges in the popularity of the far right in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden; to right-wing parties formally entering government in Austria and Italy; to the reelection of Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orbán, with a super majority—nativist populism has proven itself a force to be reckoned with. These trends have been punctuated by two seismic events: the decision by UK voters to leave the European Union and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, which together have shaken core assumptions about the stability and longevity of liberalism and social democracy.

At the same time, it is important not to overstate the success of radical-right populism—or its impact. Support for strands of this often anti-immigrant ideology has flourished in some countries, yet barely taken root in others. Spain and Portugal, for example, lack a significant radical-right populist movement, despite possessing many of the characteristics typically associated with support for nativist populism, such as a deep economic recession and high levels of political corruption (and in the case of Spain, sustained high levels of immigration).² In other countries, the populist share of the vote has declined, or populist parties have disintegrated altogether (for example, in Romania and Bulgaria). In still others, populists have had an underwhelming record once in office and either been torn apart by internal divisions (as in Finland) or alienated part of their base by failing to deliver on promises—often laced with extremist rhetoric—made while out of office.³

Support for strands of this often anti-immigrant ideology has flourished in some countries, yet barely taken root in others.

But what is often obscured by a binary preoccupation with electoral wins and losses is a momentous change to the political landscape: the erosion of the center. Center-right and particularly center-left political parties—which have for decades served as the spinal cord of Western democracies—are facing an unprecedented loss of confidence among voters. Elections in Austria, France, and Sweden in 2017 and 2018 have revealed a deep fragmentation of mainstream parties. The center left, while managing to maintain its position as Sweden's largest party in the September 2018 elections, still had its worst performance in a century (and the country's center-right party had its worst result in more than a decade). Even together, centrist parties are in many instances failing to capture the majority of the vote, meaning that choosing to form a coalition with the far right is often in fact a prerequisite to staying in power. The result is a fundamental redrawing of the political landscape.

The Transatlantic Council on Migration, an initiative of the Migration Policy Institute, convened to discuss what is driving this new wave of right-wing populism, how it is affecting immigration policymaking, and how mainstream policymakers should respond. The challenge inherent to these discussions is not only understanding how to reclaim the political middle ground that has been lost, but how to go one step further and address the root causes that have driven support for those who disrupt the status quo—and in doing so, fashion a new consensus around immigration that represents the interests of all members of society.

2 Omar G. Encarnación, "The Spanish Exception: Why Spain Has Resisted Right-Wing Populism," *Foreign Affairs*, July 20, 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/spain/2017-07-20/spanish-exception.

3 Tjitske Akkerman, *The Impact of Populist Radical-Right Parties on Immigration Policy Agendas: A Look at the Netherlands* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/populist-radical-right-parties-immigration-netherlands.



II. Drivers of Populism

To understand the drivers and dynamics behind the growth of populism and the weakening of the center, it is important to ask both *why* and *why now*? Many of the long-term social and economic drivers are not new, but have been reactivated and gained momentum in recent years. Capitalizing on public fears that immigration and other forms of change are undermining the ties binding societies together, some populist politicians have managed to present themselves as the true guardians of liberal values. Others have cast mainstream values such as equality and tolerance in a negative light, seeking to contrast values seen as being imposed from above with their more “authentic,” often ethnonational values. They have also successfully painted social spending as a near zero-sum game: each dollar invested in immigrants (and even longstanding minorities) is a dollar fewer for working-class natives. While economic factors such as rising regional disparities within countries, income inequality, and the growth of untraditional and less secure forms of work (e.g., gig-economy jobs and zero-hour contracts) are major factors driving feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement, the anger of those whom globalization has left behind transcends economics. The most visceral anger, in fact, comes from those who feel they have lost their previous social and economic status, rather than those who have experienced (or fear) socioeconomic hardship.

Many of the long-term social and economic drivers are not new, but have been reactivated and gained momentum in recent years.

While nationalism and nativism have long bubbled under the surface in many Western democracies, several factors have kept them in check—first and foremost, enormous gains in prosperity. These constraints have slowly broken down due to a confluence of internal and external factors. First, external crises have caught governments unprepared, and their responses have been slow and incomplete. The influx of migrants and asylum seekers into new parts of Europe and the United States⁴ in the past several years, combined with a spate of terrorist events *associated* with immigrants and refugees in public debate (though many were in fact perpetrated by radicalized native-born individuals), has catapulted national identity and security issues ahead of economic concerns.⁵

Second, a wedge has been growing between many voters and mainstream parties. Many established politicians have been slow to address voters’ fears—legitimate or not—allowing them to fester and slowly metastasize. The tendency both by elites and the mainstream media to dismiss or whitewash concerns they consider ill-informed (or prejudiced) has in some cases emboldened these undercurrents of wariness and anger. Gathering strength from incidents such as Hilary Clinton’s denunciation of certain

4 For a look at how immigrant settlement patterns in the United States have changed, see Jeanne Batalova and Elijah Alperin, “Immigrants in the U.S. States with the Fastest-Growing Foreign-Born Populations,” *Migration Information Source*, July 2010, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-us-states-fastest-growing-foreign-born-populations. The foreign-born share of the U.S. population reached 13.7 percent in 2017—its highest level since 1910. See U.S. Census Bureau, “American FactFinder: B05002: Place of Birth by Nativity and Citizenship Status—2017 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates,” accessed September 17, 2018, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_1YR_B05002&prodType=table.

5 Cas Mudde, ed., *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).



Trump supporters as a “basket of deplorables”⁶ (a term seized on and reclaimed by Trump supporters themselves) and the reticence of some German authorities and media outlets to report fully the spate of New Year’s Eve violence in Cologne in 2015, the sense that real concerns are not being taken seriously enough has taken root.⁷ Concerns about how officials and media communicate incidents of criminal behavior (both large and small) perpetrated by newcomers in Austria, Germany, and Sweden—three EU countries that have taken in large shares of migrants and asylum seekers since 2014—have continued to grow. Unfiltered social media platforms have also enabled those concerned to air their grievances with like-minded individuals, creating an “echo chamber” effect and allowing fears to snowball.⁸

III. Influence of Populism on Immigration Policy

Populists’ performance at the ballot box is no longer the clearest measure of their success. These politicians have proven themselves capable of having a far-reaching impact on policymaking both in and out of office—working as governors or disruptors of government, and helping to set the policy agenda as well as mold the platforms of others even when they do not perform as strongly as polls indicated.⁹ And the media’s preoccupation with their performance in national elections can obscure other markers of influence—such as their popularity at the subnational level or their role in shifting the political consensus on immigration. The greatest influence of radical-right populism, however, may be the way mainstream parties in many Western democracies have felt compelled to move (sometimes sharply) to the right on immigration and integration issues—at times even adopting the nativist rhetoric and policy positions of their populist opponents.

When European radical-right, nativist populist parties have a formal (or semiformal) role in government—whether as a coalition partner or an ad-hoc ally on certain issues—their direct impact on policy is easier to identify. They often push for more restrictive immigration, refugee, or integration policies, including reducing admissions levels for certain types of immigration (e.g., family reunification), promoting more restrictive entry requirements (e.g., tightening asylum criteria), strengthening policies on the removal of illegally resident immigrants and failed asylum seekers, or introducing new integration requirements and reducing access to benefits. For instance, the Danish People’s Party has been very successful in pushing the governing coalitions they supported between 2001–11 and again since 2015 to adopt a raft of restrictive immigration policies, from border checks and restricted access to welfare for asylum seekers, to revised integration policies that target the residents of so-called ghettos (areas with high concentrations of immigrants or children of immigrants).¹⁰

6 Domenico Montanaro, “Hillary Clinton’s ‘Basket of Deplorables,’ in Full Context of this Ugly Campaign,” NPR, September 10, 2016, www.npr.org/2016/09/10/493427601/hillary-clintons-basket-of-deplorables-in-full-context-of-this-ugly-campaign.

7 For a more in-depth analysis of the drivers of populism, see the accompanying Transatlantic Council on Migration report: Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Kate Hooper, and Meghan Benton, *In Search of a New Equilibrium: Immigration Policymaking in the Newest Era of Nativist Populism* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-policymaking-nativist-populism.

8 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *When Facts Don’t Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration’s Costs and Benefits* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/when-facts-dont-matter-immigration; Clara Hendrickson and William A. Galston, “Why Are Populists Winning Online? Social Media Reinforces Their Anti-Establishment Message,” Brookings Institution, April 28, 2017, www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2017/04/28/why-are-populists-winning-online-social-media-reinforces-their-anti-establishment-message/.

9 Pre-election polling predicted stronger performances for the Party for Freedom in the 2017 Dutch elections and for the Sweden Democrats in the 2018 Swedish elections, for example—with some pollsters even giving these populist parties a chance at claiming first place.

10 See Papademetriou, Hooper, and Benton, *In Search of a New Equilibrium*; Anders Widfeldt, *The Growth of the Radical Right in Nordic Countries: Observations from the Past 20 Years* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/growth-radical-right-nordic-countries.



For decades, the most powerful constraint on radical-right populism has been that very few parties who espoused such views were popular enough to gain national attention—let alone actually enter government. The entry into office of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the League in Italy mark notable departures from this trend. But even when they come to power, many radical-right parties find that their scope to enact reforms is narrower than they expected. As members of governing coalitions, populist parties can extract concessions from their partners as part of formal or informal agreements, but they may nonetheless struggle to translate campaign slogans into actionable—and viable—political proposals.¹¹ In the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, in which the Leave campaign succeeded largely on the promise to drastically limit immigration to the United Kingdom, policymakers and the public have slowly come to realize that doing so at anything near the scale promised will be difficult. In fact, despite the proliferation of anti-immigration rhetoric, particularly during election cycles, a wide gulf often remains between campaign promises and post-election governance results.

Working with the same “elite” these politicians loudly and aggressively criticized during their campaigns can undermine the sense of authenticity that is so critical to populism’s appeal.

The act of being in government often weakens anti-establishment populists. First, governing requires compromises—many of which can be unpalatable to their supporters. And the prospect of working with the same “elite” these politicians loudly and aggressively criticized during their campaigns can undermine the sense of authenticity that is so critical to populism’s appeal.¹² Second, once in power, many parties succumb to internal dissent about the party’s direction or priorities, particularly if some leaders feel they need to “tone down” their platform and abandon some of their more hardline positions to effectively govern. Finally, many democracies have built-in constraints on the exercise of power in the form of checks and balances. For instance, while the Trump administration has been able to make deep changes in some immigration policy areas (e.g., sharply reducing refugee admissions and expanding immigration enforcement priorities), its ability to act in others (such as building a wall along the entirety of the U.S.-Mexico border and ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program) is contained by budgetary blockages at the congressional level and court challenges.¹³

But the greatest influence of radical-right populism may be *indirect*: politicians and parties that espouse these views can successfully shape the policy agendas of their mainstream rivals both before and after an election. Geert Wilders’ “defeat” in the March 2017 Dutch elections was almost irrelevant, given his success in shifting the public debate around immigration away from economics and toward national identity (including the disparagement of Islam and culturally different “outsiders”)—moving other parties

11 Akkerman, *The Impact of Populist Radical-Right Parties on Immigration Policy Agendas*; Martin A. Schain, *Shifting Tides: Radical-Right Populism and Immigration Policy in Europe and the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/radical-right-immigration-europe-united-states.

12 Widfeldt, *The Growth of the Radical Right in Nordic Countries*.

13 Pierce, Sarah, Jessica Bolter, and Andrew Selee, *U.S. Immigration Policy under Trump: Deep Changes and Lasting Impacts* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/us-immigration-policy-trump-deep-changes-impacts. The impacts of these policy changes and the levels of resistance to them have also varied somewhat across state and local contexts. See Margie McHugh, *In the Age of Trump: Populist Backlash and Progressive Resistance Create Divergent State Immigrant Integration Contexts* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/age-trump-populist-backlash-and-progressive-resistance-create-divergent-state-immigrant.



to the right in the process.¹⁴ Even Chancellor Angela Merkel, a staunch defender of her decision to open Germany's borders to nearly 1.5 million migrants and asylum seekers since 2014, found herself under pressure to walk back on her open-door policies and institute hard-headed reforms, such as curtailing the rights of certain non-Convention refugees and increasing removals of failed asylum seekers. She also publicly condemned the burka,¹⁵ a mostly symbolic move as it is worn only by a few hundred women across Europe yet is increasingly used as a litmus test for a policymaker's commitment to preserving a certain ethno-cultural conception of national identity.¹⁶ Such concessions and adjustments by established politicians may be evidence that, ultimately, the influence of populism may be greater than the sum of its individual electoral or policy achievements.

Analysis of recent trends in Europe and the United States suggest that there are three critical forms of indirect influence:

- **Influencing the public debate and language on immigration.** Whether inside or outside of government, politicians with radical-right populist views have proven adept at framing the debate on immigration in a way that appeals to a broad part of the electorate. In response, other politicians have often adapted their rhetoric to win back some voters who have crossed over into to the populist camp, thus narrowing the gap between mainstream and nativist actors. For example, in the Netherlands, Prime Minister Rutte co-opted the nativist language of his opponents in a 2017 public letter in which he wrote that outsiders who refuse to adapt to Dutch values “should act normal or leave.”¹⁷
- **Influencing the policy agenda.** Populist parties can also influence how new policies and legislation are framed and introduced—even when they do not hold office. For example, in the run-up to the March 2017 Dutch elections, the two mainstream parties in the Netherlands both proposed restricting Islamic practices at a time when polls predicted that PVV could come in first place in the vote.¹⁸ One of the more extreme examples of a populist party setting the policy agenda is the role of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in persuading the UK government to hold a vote on the country's membership of the European Union.
- **Influencing the political landscape.** The current wave of populism has also disrupted “business as usual” in both the United States and Europe. In many European political systems accustomed to grand coalitions between center left and center right, as well as within the two-party system in the United States, there had previously been limited incentive to respond to smaller “fringe” voices. One of the byproducts of populist politicians gaining more votes has thus been to unsettle the status quo. As centrist parties and politicians become weaker and more fragmented, new coalitions will be needed. And with each new electoral success, populist parties will be able to strengthen their networks, attract more resources, and become more competitive in future elections—a self-reinforcing pattern that is likely to intensify in the coming years.

14 Wilders' party, the Freedom Party (PVV), had at points been projected to win more than 30 seats in the 2017 Dutch parliamentary election but scored 20 in the end. See Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *The Dutch Elections: How to Lose and Still Shape the Direction of a Country—and Possibly a Continent?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/news/dutch-elections-how-lose-and-still-shape-direction-country-and-possibly-continent.

15 BBC News, “Angela Merkel Endorses Burka Ban ‘Wherever Legally Possible,’” BBC News, December 6, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38226081.

16 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Meghan Benton, *In Search of Common Values amid Large-Scale Immigrant Integration Pressures* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/search-common-values-amid-large-scale-immigrant-integration-pressures.

17 For a discussion of this and other examples, see Schain, *Shifting Tides: Radical-Right Populism and Immigration Policy*.

18 See Akkerman, *The Impact of Populist Radical-Right Parties on Immigration Policy Agendas*; Schain, *Shifting Tides: Radical-Right Populism and Immigration Policy*.



IV. How Are Mainstream Political Actors Responding?

Governments have by now learned that sweeping controversial issues under the rug only increases the power of those topics. The spike in support for populists across the spectrum is reshaping the political landscape in many Western democracies, and mainstream political actors can no longer ignore these actors or the forces driving support for them. Over the past two years, populists of different stripes have entered government in a handful of countries and disrupted the status quo on immigration and other issues. Examples include the Trump administration's upending of the U.S. Republican Party's traditionally pro-immigration platform, and the restrictive immigration policies pursued by the new League-Five Star Movement government in Italy, comprised of two different populist parties. And in many other countries, rising support for populist or nativist views has led mainstream political actors to move to the right on immigration and integration issues.

The challenge facing policymakers is how to listen and respond to the concerns of voters who are drawn to politicians touting populist or nativist positions, while continuing to defend core liberal democratic values, such as equality and the protection of ethnic and religious minorities. In navigating this question in Western Europe, which has a long history with populist or nativist parties, politicians have generally adopted one or more of the following four main approaches:

1. ***Ostracizing the radical right and refusing to work with them.*** As most nativist and populist parties in Europe rely on joining coalitions with mainstream parties in order to enter government, isolating the radical right and blocking its entry into coalitions would appear to be an effective approach to limiting its direct political influence (mainstream parties in the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, have vowed not to work with the PVV or Sweden Democrats, respectively). However, this position may become untenable if populists continue to win the support of large segments of the electorate and the appeal of centrist parties continues to ebb. It can also backfire with voters. In systems that value consensus, elbowing out parties supported by a significant part of the electorate denies its voters a voice, and an action perceived as intentional marginalization by political elites could potentially strengthen rather than weaken support for the populist party further down the road.
2. ***Co-opting elements of the radical-right platform.*** Another approach is to move closer to the radical right in order to deny them political space. By co-opting some of the rhetoric and/or policy positions of their opponents, mainstream parties can try to win back skeptical voters. This was the case, for instance, when the conservative Austrian People's Party co-opted some of the populist FPÖ's language on immigration restrictions in the run-up to the 2017 election.¹⁹ However, this approach may alienate more moderate voters and make it more difficult to speak with moral authority if part of the new platform conflicts with a society's (or Europe's) fundamental values.²⁰
3. ***Cooperating formally with populist parties.*** A third approach is to work with the radical right as part of a coalition government, as has recently happened in Austria and Italy. The results of these coalitions have been mixed. In some cases, cooperation can be successful, particularly when it involves less radical populist parties (such as Norway's Progress Party or Greece's Independent Greeks) and where there is more common ground between coalition partners. In other cases, these coalitions can be very unstable, as populists struggle to reconcile their policy priorities and agree to a plan for governing. Soon after the nationalist Finns Party joined Finland's ruling coalition in 2017,

19 Tony Barber, "Austria's Experiment in Dealing with Populism: The Respectable Right is Neutralising Extremism by Borrowing Some of Its Language," *Financial Times*, October 3, 2017, www.ft.com/content/7492db06-a452-11e7-9e4f-7f5e6a7c98a2.

20 Angela Merkel, facing considerable pressure from within her own government to take a tougher stance on migration, gave a speech to the German Parliament in which she urged that countries remain loyal to their value systems when it comes to migration. She noted that the "path the EU chooses could decide if the bloc is viewed by others as a credible defender of the values it espouses." See AFP, "Migration Could Decide Europe's 'Destiny,' Says Merkel," *The Local*, June 28, 2018, www.thelocal.de/20180628/migration-could-decide-europes-destiny-merkel.



for example, disagreements between the party's moderate and more extreme wings caused the party to split, with the more radical anti-immigration voices forced to leave government.²¹

4. **Cooperating with populists on a more ad-hoc basis.** Some mainstream parties cooperate with the radical right on an ad hoc basis, for example when a minority government seeks support on specific issues, especially on budget resolutions. With the fragmentation of European political systems making minority governments an increasingly likely occurrence, mainstream parties are likely to seek issue-specific support from different constellations of smaller parties across the political spectrum.

Becoming more pragmatic about working with populist politicians on a case-by-case basis seems to have gained wider, if reluctant, acceptance. Ultimately, however, attempting to contain and reduce the power of populism—whether by isolating individual parties or by coopting elements of their platform—are palliative remedies at best. Responding to the forces driving support for populism and nativism is a complex task that goes far beyond a pragmatic decision about whether and how to work with, or in sharp opposition to, populists, especially those of the radical right. Mainstream policymakers need to dig much deeper to address the underlying currents of discontent that provide the wind to the sails of nativism and populism in the first place.

V. Recommendations: Principles for a New Equilibrium

Responding to the forces driving support for nativist populism is a complex task that goes far beyond decisions about whether and how to work with, or in sharp opposition to, politicians who champion these views. Mainstream political actors (including elected officials, public servants, and thought leaders) must find ways to address several difficult realities, including:

- deepening polarization over difficult issues and the resulting political fragmentation;
- rising inequality as many people and regions fall behind in globalizing economies;
- growing pressure on limited public resources, driven both by long-term trends (such as aging populations) and by unexpected crises (such as the global economic and fiscal crises or spikes in unmanaged migration);
- feelings of personal insecurity and loss fueled by shifting societal values and cultural norms—themselves affected directly by immigration; and
- the ensuing politics of fear and resentment that seek to activate these anxieties and deepen political fissures for political gain.

Responding to the many disparate grievances that drive nativist populism may be outside the direct control of policymakers, but if mainstream actors are to restore public trust in immigration policy and forge a new “middle ground,” they will need to acknowledge the uneven distribution of the benefits and costs of immigration and globalization writ large and demonstrate that they are taking concrete steps to redress this inequality. Crucially, policymakers will need to combat the growing perception that they are unable or unwilling to manage immigration and minimize the disorder that fuels public skepticism of it. Responding to populism, in other words, hinges on communicating better with members of the public about the rapid

²¹ Widfeldt, *The Growth of the Radical Right in Nordic Countries*.



changes in society over which they feel they have no control—and in particular, fashioning a new consensus around immigration. These deeper, societal reforms should be built on three principles:

- **Managing immigration more effectively.** This should be done in a way that emphasizes fairness, predictability of outcomes, and transparency. Governments need to demonstrate, above all, that they have the interests of their citizens and legal residents at heart—including by pursuing policies that enhance economic growth and labor-market success, and by ensuring that governance systems do not appear to be rewarding those who break the rules. This includes taking decisive steps to minimize chaos at the border and disorder in the interior (which may necessitate operating effective and fair return procedures), and planning to respond to a range of possible contingencies to better insulate migration systems from the kind of instability that can poison the well of public trust.²² On the thorny issues of identity and cultural change, policymakers must demonstrate much better listening skills and find ways to engage in constant dialogue with the public about the aims and effects of policy. Finally, they must ensure that policy decisions are informed by evidence, especially on how policies affect immigrants' integration outcomes and how immigration affects vulnerable native-born populations.
- **Conveying complexity clearly.** In the immigration arena, this entails communicating to publics both the benefits of a well-managed immigration system and the unavoidable tradeoffs this requires. All too often, policymakers assume that facts alone will win an argument. But the reality is that much of the evidence that feeds into policymaking is too abstract or technical to resonate with many nonexperts, particularly when pitted against the vividness of their everyday experiences. Focusing narrowly on the national picture also risks overlooking the diversity of local experiences that fuel much of the debate around immigration politics today. When making the case for their positions on immigration and integration, policymakers need to be transparent about what the evidence does—and does not—say, and communicate clearly how they reached their decisions on these emotive issues.
- **Shining a spotlight on inequality.** Doing so requires acknowledging (and attending to) one of society's most uncomfortable truths: many segments of society have been "left behind" and have failed to benefit from globalization and openings to trade. Recovery from the financial and economic crises of the past decade has been similarly uneven. With this in mind, policymakers need to invest in economic and social policies that can help disadvantaged communities stem economic decline and rekindle hope. First and foremost, this should include helping people to rebuild their lives through education and training, while also addressing social inequality and growing pressures on health and welfare systems. When making new investments, policymakers would do well to avoid targeted programs that may be seen as favoring certain groups over others and instead develop policies to equip entire communities with the tools to navigate economic and social change.

Populism is both symptom and driver of the challenges facing many Western societies today. A lack of attention in recent years to social and economic divisions has allowed them to fester and grow—creating fertile ground for radical-right voices to stir up public discontent. Governments need to learn from these mistakes and become much more proactive about managing societal divisions and providing a credible alternative to populism if they are to restore people's trust in government.

22 Demetrios G. Papademetriou, *Maintaining Public Trust in the Governance of Migration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/maintaining-public-trust-governance-migration; Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *Understanding and Addressing Public Anxiety about Immigration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/understanding-and-addressing-public-anxiety-about-immigration.



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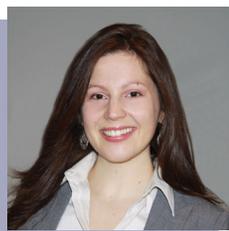
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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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