



USLRRE
Union of Socialist
Local and Regional
Representatives in Europe



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



Report

Workshop

« Populism – A Challenge to Local Democracy »

of the

**Union of Socialist Local and Regional Representatives in Europe (USLRRE),
LSAP Gemeengeforum and FEPS – Foundation of European Progressive Studies**

**on Friday, 1st of July 2016 in Luxembourg
14.00 h to 17.15 h**

**Hotel MELIÀ LUXEMBOURG
1, Park Draï Eechelen
L-1499 Luxembourg**

Programme

Opening and Welcome

Roland SCHÄFER, President of the USLRRE, Mayor of Bergkamen, President of the Association of German Towns and Municipalities

Tom JUNGEN, Vice President of the USLRRE, Mayor of the Municipality of Roeser, Chairman of the Forum of Socialist Local Representatives of Luxembourg

« Populism – A Challenge to Democracy in Europe »

Tamás BOROS, Co-Director and Head of Strategy of the political research and consultancy institute *Policy Solutions*, member of the Scientific Council of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)

Country reports « Populism – A Challenge to Local Democracy in Europe »

France:

Christophe ROUILLON, Vice President of the USLRRE, Mayor of Coulaines, Conseiller général of Sarthe, Vice President of the Association of French Mayors in charge of European affairs, Member of the Committee of the Regions

Hungary:

Kata TÜTTŐ, Vice President of the USLRRE, Councillor for the XIIth district of Budapest, Member of the party executive of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Member of the Committee of the Regions

Austria:

Dr. Günther SIDL, Director of the Volkshochschule Urania in Vienna, Member of the Regional Parliament of Niederösterreich, Councillor (Petzenkirchen)

Niederlande:

Dr. Siebo M.H. JANSSEN, Lecturer, Institute of History of the University of Cologne

Panel discussion with all speakers « Strategies to Tackle Populism »

Moderation: Tom JUNGEN, Vice President of the USLRRE, Mayor of the Municipality of Roeser, Chairman of the Forum of Socialist Local Representatives of Luxembourg

**Statement of Tamás BOROS,
Co-Director and Head of Strategy of the political research and consultancy institute Policy Solutions,
member of the Scientific Council of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)**

« Populism – A Challenge to Democracy in Europe

In his presentation (annex 1) Tamás Boros, who is member of FEPS' Scientific Council and co-director of Policy Solutions, overviewed three topics:

'What is the definition of populism?',
'What is the current state of populism in Europe?', and
'How local progressive politicians can react to populism?'

Mr Boros also spoke about the social background and values of those voters, who support populist parties in Europe. He highlighted the fact that around 30% of European voters choose these parties throughout the European Union, and that in 8 MSs rightwing populists are already in government. Addressing the feeling of insecurity and social inequalities within the EU should be the top priority for progressive parties to halt the increase of anti-establishment attitude. It is also essential to debate with populist politicians, not 'quarantine' or ignore them.

**Statement of Kata TÜTTŐ,
Vice President of the USLRRE, Councillor for the XIIth district of Budapest, Member of the party
executive of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Member of the Committee of the Regions**

Populism in Hungary

Since 2010 Hungary has an "illiberal" populist government. From the very start it is creating outside enemies to « unify the nation » and creating the illusion that it is only them, FIDESZ who can protect the Hungarians.

First in 2012 the Hungarian government started a « freedom fight » against the IMF, there where advertisements everywhere that the IMF wants to force property tax and austerity policy.

In 2014 after the national elections, the European Parliament election campaign of FIDESZ was only one message: "Respect to the Hungarians".

In the beginning of 2015 the government launched a billboard campaign on immigration and terrorism, the country was filled with billboards saying : « If you come to Hungary you have to respect our culture », « If you come to Hungary you can't take the Hungarian's jobs » (see presentation : annex 2). FIDESZ combined migration and terrorism and ignored the refugees, everyone was called a migrant who is a potential terrorist. The government launched a « national consultation », every household received a letter with questions on migration and terrorism, the turnout was low, but the outcome of this survey « suggested », that the Hungarians want the government to protect them.

The government is proposing a referendum now, it will be held in October 2015, on the rejection of the European migration quota. The message of the campaign is: « Let's send a message to Brussels, so they will understand", that Hungarians say no to migration and terrorism ».

**Statement of Christophe ROUILLON,
Vice President of the USLRRE, Mayor of Coulaines, Conseiller général of Sarthe, Vice President of the
Association of French Mayors in charge of European affairs, Member of the Committee of the Regions,**

"Populism against the people: let's become popular again!"

"Reformists are caught between right-wing and left-wing populists who each purport to provide simple solutions to the issues a complicated world.

On the right, the nationalists have changed appearance, but they secretly remain faithful to the totalitarian regimes that were overthrown 70 years ago.

On the left, the members of the movement and the communists ride the wave of rejecting the elites in power and forgetting the heritage of the Soviet regime.

In this media competition of loudmouths or fairground showmen, the Social Democrats' technical and sensible proposals seem dull and unambitious.

The example of the British referendum, Donald Trump's campaign in the USA, or the match "Marine Le Pen - Jean-Luc Mélançon" illustrate well this difficulty of being heard in a barrage of polemics, lies, and provocations.

In France, Marine Le Pen's Front National only controls 26 municipalities in 36,000. Yet, the Front National gained many delegates in the European elections of 2014 (22 in 74 with 24.86% of votes) and in the regional elections in 2014 (358 in 1758, 27.73% of votes). That is a real danger in the light of the upcoming Presidential election in May 2017!

The way out of this political corner is in holding Europe up once again as our new frontier, based on our values and the human wealth of 500 million European citizens.

We also have to tread a careful line between the need to put forward a number of strong proposals (investment, research, education, energy transition, security, citizenship,...) and the need not to create any further illusions that lead to disappointment and, eventually, rejection.

Finally, our language has to be accessible to the largest number of people and our tone has to be more persuasive, more on the offensive.

Our style needs to be more authentic, sometimes less conspicuous, cooler, closer to the ground.

In short, to counter the nationalists and anti-Europeans, we have to be popular without being populist."

**Statement of Dr. Günther SIDL,
Director of the Volkshochschule Urania in Vienna,
Member of the Regional Parliament of Niederösterreich, Councillor (Petzenkirchen)**

The debate with right-wing populist tendencies in Austria is essentially limited to the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). The main messages of this movement are the fight against the "political establishment", the threatened "foreign infiltration" and "Islamisation" which, in their view, is already taking place. When the Freedom Party says "we, together, down here against them up there", they primarily mean that they represent "ordinary people" against "aloof traditional parties", which allegedly "only look after their own interests." This was particularly effective in Austria, as a system of stability was set up after the Second World War between the Social Democratic Party and the People's Party. The criticism of excessive migration and related "Islamisation" - according to the FPÖ - is applied to all areas of politics. They are constantly comparing with what could be done, i.e. how the situation would be better if there were fewer people with a migration background in Austria. This argument is used particularly in connection with unemployment and the challenges faced by the health care system. Due to the current majority situation, a specific discussion is taking place within the Social Democratic Party as to how to deal with the Freedom Party with respect to forming a possible government. There is a valid federal party convent decision against forming a coalition with the FPÖ, yet the reality is different in the municipalities and in one state, the Burgenland.

The election of the Federal President is particularly interesting now. The Constitutional Court declared the run-off ballot void on grounds of formal irregularities. For the first time in the Second Republic, there is no candidate from the two former main parties and the result of the first run-off round between the Freedom Party's candidate, Nobert Hofer, and the former chair of the Austrian Greens, Alexander Van der Bellen, was extremely close. However, the latter came out on top.

**Statement of Dr. Siebo M.H. Janssen,
Lecturer, Institute of History of the University of Cologne**

With the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the political climate in the Netherlands changed dramatically. Resentments, which had only been simmering in the background until then, broke fresh ground in the municipal elections of 2002 in Rotterdam with the election of the Leefbaar Rotterdam movement under Pim Fortuyn. After his sweeping political success in the municipal elections, Fortuyn decided to stand in the parliamentary elections in May 2002. However, he was murdered two days before the elections by a radical animal rights activist and, though his party turned out second strongest (Lijst Pim Fortuyn - LPF), it disintegrated within a few weeks and was already dissolved in 2003. Various smaller right-wing groups didn't make it into the Parliament. This only changed with the Dutch people's clear rejection of the EU Constitution in June 2005. The formerly unknown back-bencher Geert Wilders (former VVD - right-wing Liberal) used his success as opponent of the EU Constitution to found his own party (Partij voor Vrijheid or Freedom Party - PVV) which is even more radical than the Lijst Fortuyn and which advocate radical anti-EU, anti-Islam, and anti-refugees policies. Due to his increasingly radical language, Wilders managed to attract ever growing groups of voters. Formally, the PVV has only one member - Wilders himself. According to his own statement, he thus wants to avoid that people, who don't support his views, stir up trouble and endanger the project.

At the municipal elections in 2014, Wilders only stood for elections in Almere and in The Hague. In Almere, the PVV became the strongest party and in The Hague the second strongest party. Local political activities are limited to advocating national demands at the municipal level. The electoral issues of Islam, refugees, migration and Europe are also the dominant topics of the PVV's local activities. That is not surprising given that the PVV is a party with only a few topics and many national mandate holders also sit on municipal councils, e.g. Wilders on the Municipal Council of The Hague.

There is no cooperation between the PVV and the other parties at national, regional, or local level. An experiment at the national level from 2010-12, a so-called tolerance coalition, in which the PVV tolerated a coalition of CDA (Christian Democrats) and VVD, failed because of the implementation of austerity measures aimed at reducing the budget deficit. Wilders was not prepared to support these and let the coalition fail. Despite this coalition break-down - allegedly due to the social responsibility Wilders claimed to feel for the older generation and economically weaker persons - he didn't suffer any political damage. In surveys, the PVV is still viewed as being by far the strongest party (approx. 1/3 of the 150 seats). The situation is particularly dramatic for the social democratic PvdA, which went from almost 40 seats to approx. 10 seats. If Wilders were to participate in any future government, or even become Prime Minister, a referendum on a Nexit - analogous to the Brexit - is going to be a key demand.