

VOTING FOR FAR-RIGHT AND RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES: SPATIAL PERSPECTIVES

VILLA VIGONI/MENAGGIO, 19–21 JUNE 2025

Recent national and European Parliament elections across European countries have shown increasing support for far-right and right-wing populist political parties, calling for a rise of nationalism in Europe.

In general, these populist parties are opposing the establishment which can be the bureaucratic elite, as well as the capital elite. They also often highlight an authoritarian belief in a strictly ordered society, expressed by a charismatic leader that appeals to the discontent and worries of the ordinary people. This kind of rhetoric in the European context is connected to a surge in anti-EU sentiments.

Besides an overall trend in wealth polarization, as is well known, many countries are also marked by stark regional divides. Voting patterns are often unevenly distributed over space, which makes it very relevant to explore, along with other relevant factors, the spatial dimension. Rodríguez-Pose (2018) connected the populist wave to a feeling of discontent that is increasing in certain regions due to the perception of poor development prospects and an increasing belief that those places have “no future”, labelling recent ballot outcomes across the EU as “the revenge of the places that don’t matter.”

Italy is an interesting example, as it is characterised by strong internal disparities, experienced a very hard period from the 2008 financial crisis and onwards and has seen an escalation of the right-wing sovereign/nationalist political parties.

Considering the spatial dimension along with inter alia, political, social, economic and wellbeing factors, is relevant not only for enhancing the understanding of voting patterns but also for the formulation of policy implications: better place-sensitive territorial development policies are needed in order to find a solution to the problem.

The aim of this seminar is to bring together social democratic politicians, decision-makers and experts to discuss and compare internal disparities across Europe, to tackle far-right and right-wing parties and contribute to mitigate those disparities and, eventually, to win back segments of the electorate that today vote right or decide not to vote.

Our goal is to create increased cooperation among the participants and to outline a possible common social democratic agenda at a time when the social democrats themselves seem to be showing difficulties in formulating solutions for some of the people's specific problems.

Key questions will include:

- Support for antisystem parties and multidimensional peripherality.
- Is populism an offspring of the recent (2008–2009) global financial and economic crisis? And what is the role of austerity that many countries implemented shortly after the crisis in determining the increase in support for populist parties?
- What role do immigration and the recent refugee crisis play in the rise of support for populist parties? And the gap between perceptions and reality regarding immigration?
- What is the role of new media in spreading populist messages?

The program aims to address these key questions. There will be very short inputs at the beginning of each session, as our central goal is debate and discussion. You are all invited to contribute to the debate with your specialist knowledge, your impressions and points of view. The entire conference will be held under Chatham House rule.

THURSDAY, 19 JUNE 2025

Individual arrival

19:00

Welcome

Ambassador **Luigi Mattiolo**, President of Villa Vigoni
Armin Hasemann, Director, FES Italy

Working dinner

21:00

Setting the framework: The European panorama

- **Francesco Prota**, Università di Bari Aldo Moro
- **Ernst Hillebrand**, FES European Economies of the East, Budapest

FRIDAY, 20 JUNE 2025

09:15

Introduction into the program

Armin Hasemann, Director, FES Italy

9:30

Session 1: Socio-economic inequalities in Italy

The divide between Northern and Southern Italy is a historical issue, but the heterogeneity of the South and its untapped potential are often overlooked. At the same time, the North is generally assumed to be more advanced, though recent socioeconomic shifts challenge this perception. Persistent inequalities affect people's well-being and contribute to social instability.

Key questions:

- Increasing depopulation, high rates of demographic ageing and inequalities in the provision of services and infrastructure
- The request for differentiated autonomy
- Efficiency versus equity debate in territorial development

Input:

- **Francesco Prota**, University Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy
- **Leonardo Piergentili**, University of Macerata, Italy
- **Valerie Rabault**, MP, France

Moderator: **Michele Bellini**, Democratic Party, Italy

11:00

Session 2: Antisystem parties and multidimensional peripherality

Support for antisystem parties is often linked to multidimensional peripherality, a condition characterized by economic marginalization, social exclusion, and political disenfranchisement. In regions or communities that experience limited access to economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, or a sense of detachment from mainstream political discourse, antisystem parties can gain traction by channelling dissatisfaction and offering alternative narratives to the status quo. This phenomenon is particularly evident in areas where globalization, technological advancements, or shifting labour markets have exacerbated inequalities, leaving segments of the population feeling neglected or unheard. As a result, multidimensional peripherality—encompassing geographical, socio-economic, and political dimensions—creates fertile ground for the rise of political movements that challenge traditional institutions and advocate for radical change.

Key questions:

- Urban-rural divide in anti-EU sentiment
- Regional development trap
- Job insecurity and interpersonal inequality

Case Study:

- **Astrid Sverresdotter Dypvik**, think tank *Agenda*, Norway
- **Czesław Adamiak**, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Polonia
- **Victoria Stoicu**, MP, Romania

Moderator: **Máriam Martínez-Bascuñán**, University of Madrid

12:30

Lunch break

14:00

Session 3: Populism and austerity

The 2008–2009 global financial crisis played a crucial role in fuelling the rise of populism by exacerbating economic insecurity, increasing unemployment, and deepening social inequalities. The crisis eroded trust in traditional elites and institutions, as many governments prioritized bank bailouts over direct support for struggling citizens. In response, several countries implemented austerity measures, cutting public spending, reducing welfare programs, and increasing taxes, which further intensified public frustration. These policies disproportionately affected lower- and middle-income groups, creating fertile ground for populist parties—both right- and left-wing—to gain traction. By opposing austerity, neoliberal policies, and mainstream political elites, populist movements capitalized on growing resentment, offering alternative narratives that emphasized national sovereignty, economic protectionism, and direct representation of “the people” against perceived corrupt elites.

Key questions:

- Supranational integration and the polarization of European party politics
- Decline in trust in national and European political institutions
- Spatially uneven distribution of the benefits of the EU integration process

Case study:

- **Cristina Rat**, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania
- **Manos Matsaganis**, Polytechnic University of Milan, Italy
- **François Geerolf**, OFCE, France

Moderator: **Trygve Svensson**, think tank *Agenda*, Norway

15:30

Session 4: Immigration and perceptions

Immigration and the recent refugee crisis have fuelled support for populist parties by amplifying fears about economic competition, cultural change, and national security. Populist leaders have framed immigration as a threat to national identity and social stability, advocating for stricter border controls. A key factor is the gap between perception and reality, as media and political rhetoric often exaggerate negative impacts despite evidence of immigration's economic and social benefits. This misalignment has been exploited by populists to mobilize support, portraying themselves as defenders of the people against elites who allegedly ignore the consequences of migration.

Key questions:

- Voting preferences and expectations about future immigration
- Perception of immigrants as competitors for resources, especially in areas of economic hardship
- Correlation between the rise of populist radical right and net-migration loss

Case study:

- **Jonathan Overmeyer**, FES Berlin
- **Anastasios Katsianis**, PASOK, Greece
- **Alexis Lefranc**, Parti socialiste, France

Moderator: **Sylo Taraku-an**, think tank *Agenda*, Norway

17:00

Coffee break

17:15

Session 5: Populism and the role of old and new media

Populism has always relied on media to shape public opinion, with traditional outlets like newspapers and television amplifying populist rhetoric. The rise of social media has transformed this dynamic, allowing populist leaders to bypass traditional gatekeepers and engage directly with supporters, fostering anti-elitist narratives. Social media algorithms favour emotional and polarizing content, reinforcing populist messages and deepening societal divisions. While old media still plays a role in legitimizing populist discourse, digital platforms have accelerated its spread, making media a key driver in the rise and persistence of populism.

Key questions:

- Television news vs information spread on social media
- Post-truth and fake news
- Populist contagion and perceived acceptability of populism

Case study:

- **Michele Bellini**, Democratic Party, Italy
- **Aleksandar Dimitrov**, University of National and World Economy, Bulgaria

Moderator: **Guillem Vidal Lorda**, government of Catalonia, Spain

19:00 *Dinner*

SATURDAY, 21 JUNE 2025

09:30 **Political Discussion: What is the social democratic agenda in respect of the current situation?**

Theses:

- Greater attention must be paid to territorial inequalities by progressive political forces
- An investment strategy aimed at reducing territorial inequalities should focus on the provision of public goods in order to ensure territorial uniformity in the degree of protection of civil and social rights
- Place-based industrial policies not only a means to promote structural change, innovation and economic growth, but rather a tool through which to pursue social (primarily the creation of "good employment") and environmental objectives
- Pursuing inclusive growth, in the sense of growth built with the participation of all, can represent a brake against the growing sense of political disaffection, strengthening public trust in governments and in the social contract

Political commentaries: lessons from member states & next steps

- **Katarzyna Ueberhahn**, MP, Poland
- **Velibor Mačkić**, University of Zagreb, Croatia
- **Amani Loubani**, Vice Mayor of Malmö, Sweden

Moderator: **Francesco Prota**, University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy

11:45 **Closing remarks**

12:00 **Light lunch & Departure**

Venue:

Villa Vigoni // German-Italian Centre for European Dialogue
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