

# Is the European Union Evolving or Failing?

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## Abstract

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has seen and grappled with a varied degree of crisis, which a few observers considered as proof of its vulnerability and at worst scenario - existential threat. As it is with every crisis, there are gainers and losers; there are those who benefit from the fallout and others who manage to turn vulnerability into opportunity and strength. The crisis surrounding the EU can be characterized along the latter context, particularly in the backdrop of rising European populism. The rise of contemporary European populism has raised many questions and generated debates. Based on its anti-EU rhetoric and growing public acceptability, populism is interpreted as EU's political nemesis. In the midst of rising European populism, the paper looks at the debates in which the EU is considered as a failing or failed project. It also explores the extent to which European populism impacts the European political landscape. The paper explores the notion of populism as an anti-EU movement, bent at dislodging and disintegrating the Union. It argues that the actions of the populist parties suggest otherwise; populist dramatization underscores EU's continuous evolution and transition instead of its disintegration.

**Keywords:** Populism, EU in Transition, EU's Demise, EU Legitimacy, EU-Exit, Brexit.

## Introduction

In my paper 'EU in Transition or a Failed Project' written in the backdrop of the huge clouds of trials, perplexities, and crises hanging above the European Union (EU), I examined how the trajectory and intensity of crises in EU generated the notion of a failing – failed European project or a collapsing EU as Thies quizzed.<sup>1</sup> In addition to presenting the compelling views of those who considered the EU a failed project, the paper equally showcased the success stories of the EU amidst

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<sup>1</sup> Najimdeen Bakare, "EU in Transition or a Failed Project?" *Policy Perspectives* 11, no. 2 (2014):71-92, DOI: 10.13169/polipers.11.2.0071; and Wallace J. Thies, "Is the EU Collapsing?" *International Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2012): 225-39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2012.01110.x>.

humongous challenges. The EU was portrayed in light of evolution, passing through a transition.<sup>2</sup>

The present study is seemingly a follow-up study of the said article, and if one might revisit the debates raised therein, it is indisputable that the polarizing arguments discussed almost a decade ago have not disappeared. In fact, the current wave of European populism has somewhat given more life to the discussion. Given populist rhetoric, it is likely and also tempting to construe European populism as explicitly calling for the disintegration of the EU. The present study, however, critically explores the actions of European populism and argues it is doing otherwise. The rhetoric of populism might explicitly be critical of the EU or at worse scenario, pointing at EU's disintegration, but upon a careful re-evaluation of European populism at the regional level, its action(s) are considerably supporting the argument of an EU in transition, rather than the demise or disintegration of the Union.

For a better perspective, the following discussion is structured into three parts. The first part revisits some of the compelling arguments suggesting that the European project is a failure. The second part discusses the influence of populism on European political landscape. It explores how populism is engendering the breakdown of socialization, disturbing the structure of traditional and established political parties across Europe, influencing political language and causing paradigm shift from political incorrect to correct, gradually mainstreaming itself, aggravating Euroscepticism, and fanning the rise of discriminatory attitude(s) towards European minorities. The last segment examines the action(s) of populists differently: it presents arguments that challenge the notion about populism bent at disintegrating the EU. It analyzes the ground realities and actions of the populist parties which support and reaffirm the view of an EU in transition and contrary to former's characterization as anti-EU, Eurosceptic. It is argued that inasmuch as populism gathers more momentum democratically, winning national elections and gaining more seats in the EU parliament, it is implicitly working to fix the EU from within and restructuring national politics.

### **Failing or Failed EU?**

While it is undebatable that the performance of the EU is largely outstanding and incompatible when compared to other regional

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<sup>2</sup> Bakare, "EU in Transition or a Failed Project?" Enrico Spolaore, "What Is European Integration Really About? A Political Guide for Economists," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2013): 125-144; and Philippe C. Schmitter, *How to Democratize the European Union...and why Bother?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

institutions, such as Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to mention a few. Nonetheless, the EU is not insusceptible to criticism over its functioning and reactions to crises. In recent years, a plethora of regional studies literature is dedicated for critiquing the EU vis-à-vis national politics in the EU member states, at the regional, and international fronts respectively. The critique resultantly gave birth to two schools of thought, namely what this paper refers to as the 'antagonist', generally dubbed as Euroscepticism and 'protagonist-transitionist.' The following discussion explores the arguments of the antagonist-Eurosceptic school; why and how it posits a failing or failed EU project and its eventual disintegration.

### ***EU Legitimacy***

The central focus of the argument is on the democratic legitimacy of the EU and whether the Union has the enduring stamina for the recurring crises – pointing at EU disintegration,<sup>3</sup> and which according to one critic is irreversible.<sup>4</sup> While attempting to offer explanations whether the theory of integration vis-à-vis the EU has reached its climax, Hans Vollaard suggested that the relevance and legitimacy of the EU became more questionable following the outbreak of the Eurozone financial crisis and the subsequent frenzy of EU-exit.<sup>5</sup> In Schmidt's view, the discussion of EU's democratic legitimacy is an incomplete discourse without a better understanding of 'EU's responsiveness to European citizens' political 'input,' and the quality of the EU's 'throughput' processes<sup>6</sup> both of these would decide EU's political 'output'. Hence the quality of the citizens' input has a vital role in the overall output, and as such, mere criticism of the output as a proof of EU's inefficiency or failure is a misjudgment – legitimacy is not monolithic, but characteristically composite in nature.

### ***Usurping Institutions***

One important issue connected to the debate of EU legitimacy and the discourse of a failed project, is the legitimacy and democraticness of the

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Webber, *European Disintegration? The Politics of Crisis in the European Union*, The European Union Series (London: Red Globe Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> George Soros, "The Disintegration of the EU is now Practically Irreversible," *South China Morning Post*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1982113/disintegration-eu-now-practically-irreversible>.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Vollaard, *European Disintegration: A Search for Explanations*, Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Vivien Schmidt, "The Eurozone's Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy: Can the EU Rebuild Public Trust and Support for European Economic Integration?" (paper 15, European Commission, Brussels, 2015), DOI: 10.2765/5015.

EU institutions, namely, the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Council (EC), the European Commission (EC), and the European Parliament (EP). Over the years, there has been a growing apathy within the European public and amongst local political elites towards the EU institutions, which eventually morphed into populist sentiment across the EU. The concerns are many, but the allegation of EU increasingly becoming undemocratic are being made because of its tendency to usurp authority which is eroding the sovereignty of member states through its institutions. Such proclivity, they argue, undermines the legitimacy of national governments and the democratic will of member states and their electorates.<sup>7</sup> The allegation raises and problematizes the question of supremacy between institutional and national sovereignty. Such sentiment resonates with the populist's arguments that challenge the legitimacy of the EU over its undemocratic practices.<sup>8</sup> In this backdrop, the EU and its institutions have continuously been denigrated by certain aggrieved European elites on one hand, while the Eurobarometer documents the distrust of European citizens towards the EU on the other.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Andrew Moravcsik dismisses EU's democratic deficits as polemical misjudgment and misplacement.<sup>10</sup> Diane Fromage and Ton van den Brink argue that post-Lisbon Treaty (2007), political climate disturbed the link between the national and the European legislatures, but it nevertheless granted member states certain prerogatives such as getting closely involved in EU affairs. Arguably this becomes a constitutional transformation that recognizes the legitimacy of national parliaments as true representatives of the states in the EU parliament.<sup>11</sup>

### **Poor Financial Performance**

Sound economic and financial performance is one amongst many measurable yardsticks of rating the relevance and astuteness of any sound administration or institution. Keeping this in view, the Eurozone

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<sup>7</sup> Diane Fromage and Ton van den Brink, "Democratic Legitimation of EU Economic Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for European Legislatures," *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 3 (2018):235-248 (236), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1450407>.

<sup>8</sup> Erik Jones, "Towards a Theory of Disintegration," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 3 (2018):440-451, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1411381>.

<sup>9</sup> EC, *Europeans and the EU Budget*, Standard Eurobarometer 90, report (Brussels: European Commission, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, "Preferences, Power and Institutions in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Europe," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 7 (2018):1648-1674, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12804>; —, "In Defence of the Democratic Deficit: Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 3 (2002):603-624.

<sup>11</sup> Fromage and Brink, "Democratic Legitimation of EU Economic Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for European Legislatures," 236.

was created, not just as a common market for the member states, but as an arrangement for commercial and financial comfort of the members. In the wake of the Eurozone financial crisis, the political and economic capacity to proffer an immediate pragmatic response was not just perplexing and berating for the EU elites, the perplexity trickled down to the European public, leading to the disenchantment of the Eurozone and the governing elites.

The political and economic dismay at that time fostered and enabled populist politicians to cast a shadow of failure on European elites, whom they castigated as the agents of globalization that favor few and estrange many – deserting (the masses) in economic and financial perplexity. Amidst such confusion, EU member states underwent serious domestic upheavals as witnessed during the Eurozone financial crisis. At the institutional level, there was a proposition that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should bail out the EU of its economic and financial worries<sup>12</sup> and simultaneously China also extended its financial hand to few EU states.<sup>13</sup> The interference of external actors, trying to salvage the EU fueled disappointment and reservation, particularly in the case of China, which not too long ago, was characterized as part of the global south. Actors like China coming to the rescue of the so-called advanced, wealthy, and industrialized Western nations was considered unbecoming and derogatory; how could the Orient (East) rescue the Occident (The West). Although not all EU member states rejected the idea of China's bailout,<sup>14</sup> saved for few (Western) member states apprehensive of Europe falling under the control of China.<sup>15</sup> Even when the EU leaders requested China's helping hand, the Chinese leadership was equally cautious of bailing the Eurozone, given the vagueness of the crisis and the dearth of serious action on the part of the EU to tackle and offer immediate solution to the sovereign debt crisis.

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<sup>12</sup> "Portugal Reaches Deal on EU and IMF Bail-out," *BBC News*, May 4, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-13275470>; and Phillip Inman, "IMF Clashes with Osborne over Refusal to Back Eurozone Bailout," *Guardian*, April 17, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/apr/17/imf-clashes-osborne-eurozone-bailout>.

<sup>13</sup> "Eurozone Seeks Bailout Funds from China," *BBC News*, October 28, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15489202>.

<sup>14</sup> Ingrid Melander and Harry Papachristou, "China's Wen Offers to Buy Greek Debt," *Reuters*, October 2, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-china/chinas-wen-offers-to-buy-greek-debt-idUSTRE69112L20101002>. China bought Greek debt and same financial bailout was offered to Portugal.

<sup>15</sup> "Euro Debt Crisis to Test EU-China Partnership," *EURACTIV*, February 14 2012, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/euro-debt-crisis-to-test-eu-china-partnership/820179/>; and

Wolf Richter, "The Crisis isn't Bad Enough for Europe to Give in to China Yet," *Business Insider*, November 14, 2011, <https://www.businessinsider.com/eurozone-refuses-chinese-demands-turns-down-bailout-money-2011-11>.

The inability of the EU to find swift remedy for the financial crisis, which led to serious economic and financial meltdown and woes, without any exemption, in many EU countries lead to the notion of a failing or failed EU. While the Eurozone crisis caused the EU some degree of discomfort, conversely, populist politicians comfortably exploited the political fallout of the crisis to argue that the EU has failed its citizens. The crisis presented them with an opportunity to politically strengthen their discourse of populism, expand their populist rhetoric across the continent and ultimately showcase the Union as a failed and unsustainable project. In addition, they also argued that the failure of the EU project is situated in the intrinsic contradictions within the Euro system itself and being one of the factors that explains the Eurozone financial crisis and why resolving the crisis was protracted. Some would argue although the Eurozone claims to maintain a common currency and market, but the reality of the single currency is not common for all Eurozone members: few members are conspicuously rich, other (particularly the Southern states) are languishing in bankruptcy. Both are two sides of the same coin and even though the financial crisis was a common concern, it was more sensitive and severer for the nations of southern Europe. Unfortunately, the embedded contradiction became more pronounced, when the idea of bailing out the affected countries turned unpopular in the rich states.<sup>16</sup>

### **Populism**

As populism gains more acceptability and legitimacy, its level of contagiousness is also increasing. As a political movement that cut across continental Europe, populism defeats the argument of a movement that purely appeals to the disgruntled political elites in Europe's wealthy states. Instead populism has demonstrated the extent and potent of its appeal, leaving no part of Europe untouched. Today, no country on the continent is safe from radical political agitation, either from the right or left. Though one might argue that populism itself has become a form of socialization, identity, and a sense of belonging,<sup>17</sup> populism has shown that neither the geographical location nor economic standing of a country could prevent it from being swayed by its popularity. In today's Europe, both the 'supposed wealthy states' and the relatively growing EU member states are together grappling with populism. Populism as an ideology and a form of socialization is true for the European states. The spirit of populism relegates any insinuation

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, "Europe After the Crisis: How to Sustain a Common Currency," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no 3 (2012):54-68 (58).

<sup>17</sup> Najimdeen Bakare, "The Breakdown of Socialisation and Political Re-assertiveness of European Far-Right," *Policy Perspectives* 14, no. 2 (2017): 55-82, DOI: 10.13169/polipers.14.2.0055.

that only the rich Western states could remain as the leading socializing agents, as was the case during the second and third wave of EU enlargement.<sup>18</sup>

Scholars of regionalism argue that EU enlargement and the integration of former communist countries into the EU helped to socialize the latter. Integration was instrumental in transforming them from authoritarian to democratic path; through the EU integration, both the political elites and by extension the public adopted democratic and liberal values that had made western and northern Europe, politically and economically stable.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Populism in European Political Landscape***

To contest that populism has not marked a niche or effected noticeable changes in Europe is far from reality. One, populist rhetoric is increasingly influencing political language across the continent and also affecting public debate. Besides, populism has awakened not just the apolitical from their political apathy, it has also accorded voice to the hitherto politically voiceless. In my assessment, what was found missing in the literature and discussions about populism is how the latter stirred the sentiments that were long hibernated. It appears unconvincing and unacceptable that populist politicians should solely be applauded for making populist sentiments popular or be despised for driving a wedge between the long stable political establishment that favored and protected certain form of political socialization, and the public. For populism to be meaningful or ignite people's sentiment, there must be something ignitable in the people; and as Stephan Lewandowsky once noted 'populism and hatred do not erupt, they are stoked.'<sup>20</sup> Premised on this, the acceptability level of populism, is the logical outcome of that crisscross and concord, therefore, success of populism should be situated in the legitimacy derived from the people, hence, a joint effort, never a singular venture of few charismatic politicians, flaunting their political persona. To this end, the performance of populist parties in Greece, Italy, France, Austria, and Poland to mention a few, further underscores the combined legitimization of populism.

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<sup>18</sup> Najimdeen Bakare, "Redefining Democracy and Political Assertiveness: A Constructivist Exposition of European Populism," in *Anti-Europeanism: Critical Perspectives towards the European Union*, eds. Marco Baldassari, Emanuele Castelli, Matteo Truffelli and Giovanni Vezzani (Heidelberg: Springer, 2019), 57-73.

<sup>19</sup> Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, eds., *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky, "Why is Populism Popular? A Psychologist Explains," *Conversation*, June 21, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/why-is-populism-popular-a-psychologist-explains-61319>.

Two, even when a few scholars still count it as political rambling, contemporary European populism has demonstrated how consequential it could be, in terms of mainstreaming itself.<sup>21</sup> During the 2017 and 2018 elections in Europe, the established and traditional political parties were forced to borrow and employ populist rhetoric for several reasons, either to prove their sense of nationalism, European-ness or integrity as the parties of the people. In concord, Gráinne de Búrca argues:

...the discourse, policies, and preferences of the vocal far right (including their populist illiberalism) is likely to strongly influence the programs and actions of mainstream and centrist parties.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, a plausible paradigm shift from political incorrectness to correctness as the established political parties are drawn into proving themselves and saying things, were hitherto dubbed as political incorrect. If traditional parties can use same tools and languages employed by populist politicians, the obvious is incontestable populism, shifting its bearing from the fringe to the mainstream. Besides, given the authoritarian proclivity of populism, with particular reference to the far-right, the political character of the EU might eventually be affected and same will be true for individual European states.<sup>23</sup>

Three, in today's Europe, the nexus of populism and Euroscepticism cannot be dismissed, even though the latter had long been a phenomenon prior to contemporary populism.<sup>24</sup> Populism, particularly its far-right variant champions a nationalist agenda that disparages the European project and enjoins EU member-states to exit the Union so that state(s) can regain their sovereign autonomy, which according to them has long been captive of the Union. The Brexit is a

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<sup>21</sup> Nathalie Brack and Nicholas Startin, "Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the Margins to the Mainstream," *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 3, (2015): 239-249, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115577231>.

<sup>22</sup> Gráinne de Búrca, "Is EU Supranational Governance a Challenge to Liberal Constitutionalism?" *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018): 337-367, [https://lawreview.uchicago.edu/sites/lawreview.uchicago.edu/files/04%20deBurca\\_S\\_YMP\\_Online.pdf](https://lawreview.uchicago.edu/sites/lawreview.uchicago.edu/files/04%20deBurca_S_YMP_Online.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> James McCarthy, "Authoritarianism, Populism, and the Environment: Comparative Experiences, Insights, and Perspectives," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109, no. 2 (2019): 301-313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2018.1554393>; and Gábor Halmai, "Populism, Authoritarianism and Constitutionalism," *German Law Journal*, 20, no. 3 (2019):296-313, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.23>; and Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Brack and Startin, "Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the Margins to the Mainstream;" and Marianne Kneuer, "The Tandem of Populism and Euroscepticism: A Comparative Perspective in the Light of the European Crises," *Contemporary Social Science* 14, no. 1 (2019): 26-42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1426874>.

unique example, though Britain is not alone tempted to exit the EU, it is true of other EU states that have been contemplating exiting the EU. The contagious disease of Euroscepticism and exiting the EU is no longer a British disease.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere across the EU, few parties have entertained the idea of quitting the EU. In The Netherlands, the Populist Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders and Forum voor Democratie have been demanding Nexit. Same is true of Austria, where the anti-immigration Freedom party (FPÖ) calls for – Auxit or Oexit. The anti-immigration Sweden Democrats, led by Jimmie Åkesson has equally floated Swexit, while Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the French Front National (FN) party suggested she would ensure Frexit.<sup>26</sup> These waves of populist intentions to sabotage the Union reinforce the sentiment of the end of the European project. Placing the above discussion in perspective, the following excerpt from the afore cited article captures why and how the EU was considered a failed project:

As to the recent fallouts of the Eurozone crisis, these delineate a unique scenario since the creation of the European Union. The Eurozone crisis was a trauma having a snowballing effect. Inactive issues became active and the future of pending issues became gloomy, with particular reference to the possibility and plausibility of further enlargement of the EU.

The crisis gave life to ideological tussle, political difference, EU member scepticism and nationalist propensity ensnared the Union from finding a swift solution to her problems. Such inability aggravated the discontentment of European citizens for EU institutions, a state of mind complicated by rising unemployment amongst European youth across the continent. The cracks in the union gave-in to external interference (in terms of IMF and China involvement) and confidence of few EU member-states to openly challenge union principle and threat of exiting the Euro on their own accord. It may be argued by some that the EU is more or less falling apart, thus a failed project.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Leonard, "The British Problem and What it Means for Europe" (brief ECFR/128, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, 2015), 1-12, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR\\_128\\_BREXIT\\_\(March\\_-\\_final\).pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_128_BREXIT_(March_-_final).pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Kate Lyons and Gordon Darroch, "Frexit, Nexit or Oexit? Who will be Next to Leave the EU," *Guardian*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/27/frexit-nexit-or-oexit-who-will-be-next-to-leave-the-eu>.

<sup>27</sup> Bakare, "EU in Transition or a Failed Project?"

## **New Contours of European Political Socialization**

To gain public attention and eventually becoming a part of continental political debate, populism has proven its ability to sway the long established political socialization. It has benefited and contributed to socialization breakdown—the political rupture that paves the way for oppositional values, based on radical ideology, with the intent to cause radical replacement of the dominant ideology,<sup>28</sup> which now inundates the European political landscape.<sup>29</sup> The outcome(s) of socialization breakdown is manifold. Though indifference towards the EU has always been in the making, populism has further accentuated it. The significant gain of the populist bloc in recent 2019 European parliamentary elections further demonstrates the capacity of the bloc to disturb the established socialization, heighten anti-EU rhetoric, and by extension, contribute to the desertion of established political parties. If across Europe, populist parties are either the ruling governments or powerful coalition partners, this itself is a manifested sign of breakdown of socialization or a rejection of traditional – established political parties.

The nexus of populism and socialization breakdown cannot be disputed in the context of rising human rights violations, hate speech, and violence towards minorities (of all kinds – particularly the Muslim minority) in Europe. Based on its findings back in 2017, Michael O’Flaherty, the Director of European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) stated:

Almost a decade ago we warned about the presence of large-scale ethnic discrimination and hatred. Today, these new results show that our laws and policies are inadequately protecting the people they are meant to serve.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, even the EU agency recognises the imminent threat to minority rights which is now more alarming amidst the rising populism.

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<sup>28</sup> “Locality Politics” in *Political Geography, World Economy, Nation-state and Locality*, Peter J. Taylor and Colin Flint, 4th ed. (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Bakare, “The Breakdown of Socialisation and Political Re-assertiveness of European Far-Right.”

<sup>30</sup> FRA, “Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey – Main Result,” (Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017, [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2017-eu-midis-ii-main-results\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-midis-ii-main-results_en.pdf)).

The rise of populism and the following socialization breakdown provides the context and raw material for profound anti-immigration, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination.<sup>31</sup> Addressing the nexus between populism and the increasing discriminatory challenges facing European minorities, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report (2018) argues that populist 'demagogues use to fuel xenophobia and Islamophobia,<sup>32</sup> and that has remained unabated given the scapegoating of 'refugees, immigrant communities, and minorities... truth is a frequent casualty, nativism, xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia are on the rise.'<sup>33</sup> In recent years, violence against immigrant communities has somewhat become 'acceptable' in the backdrop of institutional legitimacy of populist rhetoric and the consequent socialization breakdown. This is true in countries where radical rights have openly displayed their violent tendency against the 'other' i.e. foreigner.<sup>34</sup> There is no mistaking that nativist rhetoric geared at protecting the interests of native-born or people considered as truly European against those of immigrants and keeping Europe 'purged' from refugees are indication of how populism is driving Europe far away from its traditional 'welcoming and receptive' character. Even while immigration laws across the continent have become more restrictive; socialization breakdown vis-à-vis populism wants a more rigid and harder immigration policy. Meanwhile, the actions of fringe groups, shouldering the responsibility of watchmen against the inundation of migrants into Europe are apparent instances of the impact of populist appeal and socialization breakdown on the people.<sup>35</sup>

Further, according to the Standard Eurobarometer 2018, amongst European citizens, trust in the EU has not been very favorable. Since 2004, sizeable number of surveyed citizens expressed distrust either for the EU as an institution or the relevance of their country in

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<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Roth, "World's Autocrats Face Rising Resistance," *World Report 2019* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019), [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/hrw\\_world\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/hrw_world_report_2019.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> —, *The Pushback against the Populist Challenge* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018), [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/201801world\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/201801world_report_web.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> —, *The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values* (New York: Human Right Watch - World Report 2017), [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/wr2017-web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2017-web.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Jasper Muis and Tim Immerzeel, "Causes and Consequences of the Rise of Populist Radical Right Parties and Movements in Europe," *Current Sociology Review* 65, no. 6 (2017): 909–930, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392117717294>.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Farrell, "Defend Europe: Anti-immigrant Ship Trying to Block Refugees from Crossing Mediterranean has Funding Cancelled," *Independent*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/defend-europe-finding-patreon-refugee-boats-mediterranean-sea-c-star-migrants-right-wing-ngo-rescue-a7891946.html>.

the Union.<sup>36</sup> The rise of populism across Europe has nonetheless complicated the discourse on the relevance of the EU. The relative success of the so-called Eurosceptic parties in 2014 and 2019 European parliament elections respectively is a reason why the graph of trust maintains a low record. Even if sizeable EU population does not celebrate the EU, by way of trust, it does not, however, translate into massive demand for EU-exit.<sup>37</sup> The official Standard Eurobarometer 2018 and 2019 underscores this assertion, as there was some degree of improvement in the trust level during this time period. According to the Standard Eurobarometer 2018, the following figure 1 shows the trust level across the EU countries.

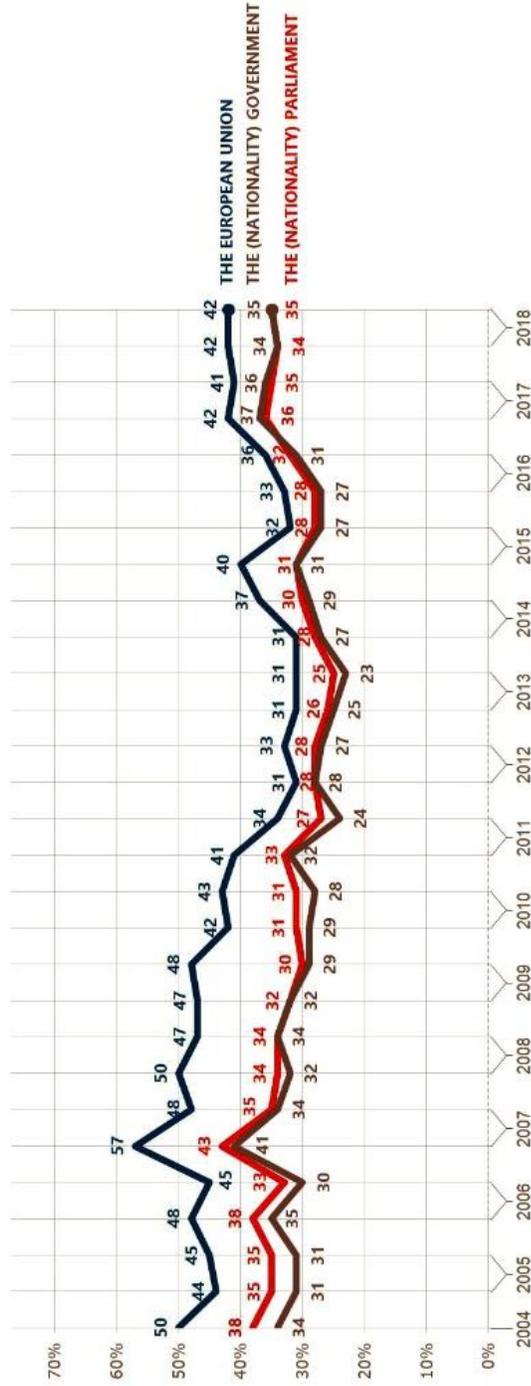
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<sup>36</sup> Tamás Boros and Zoltán Vasali, "The Rise of Euroscepticism and Possible Responses Prior to the 2014 European Parliament Elections" (paper, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Brussels, 2013), [https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/220/the\\_rise\\_of\\_euroskepticism.pdf](https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/220/the_rise_of_euroskepticism.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Frank Langfitt, "Here's Why Brexit Wasn't Followed by Frexit, Swexit or Nexit," *National Public Radio*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/26/715926169/heres-why-brexit-wasnt-followed-by-frexit-swexit-or-nexit>.

**Figure 1**

**QA8a** I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.  
 (% - EU - TEND TO TRUST)



**Source:** European Commission, "Spring 2019 Standard Eurobarometer: Europeans Upbeat about the State of the European Union – Best Results in 5 Years," press release, August 5, 2019, [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-19-4969\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-4969_en.htm).

Trust in the EU is predominant in 17 EU Member States (up from 15 in spring 2018), with the highest proportions in Lithuania (65%), Denmark (60%) and Sweden (59%). More than half of respondents also say they “tend to trust” the EU in the Netherlands (57%), Malta (56%), Portugal (55%), Estonia and Bulgaria (both 53%), Luxembourg, Finland and Belgium (all 52%) and Germany (51%). At the other end of the scale, lowest proportions are seen in Greece (26%), the United Kingdom (31%) and Czechia (32%). Overall, a majority tend “not to trust” the EU in ten countries. Finally, respondents in Hungary are evenly divided (48% “tend to trust” vs. 48%).<sup>38</sup>

Trust in the EU is at its highest level since 2014 and remains higher than trust in national governments or parliaments. Trust in the EU has increased in 20 Member States, with the highest scores in Lithuania (72%), Denmark (68%) and Estonia (60%). In addition, over half of the respondents “tend to trust” the EU in Luxembourg (59%), Finland (58%), Portugal (57%), Malta and Sweden (both 56%), Bulgaria and Hungary (both 55%), Ireland, Poland, the Netherlands and Cyprus (all 54%), Romania and Austria (both 52%) and Latvia and Belgium (both 51%).<sup>39</sup>

### **EU-Fixing from Within**

This section reflects on the question which was posed five year ago in the afore-mentioned article, whether the EU is in transition or has become a failed project. In addition, the section challenges the notion that portrays populism, especially the far right variant, as existential threat,<sup>40</sup> and perceived to be working for EU disintegration. Thus, the following discussion corroborates the narrative of EU transition and argues that EU is supported by the actions of the populist parties.

Firstly, in the backdrop of the political success stories of populist parties across Europe, populist rhetoric did not simply heighten, but has equally made populist fraternity across the continent more poised. Over the years, populism has constructed an identity for itself, as the political force, strong enough to cause socialization disintegration, disturb the

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<sup>38</sup> EC, *Europeans and the EU Budget*.

<sup>39</sup> European Commission, “Spring 2019 Standard Eurobarometer: Europeans Upbeat about the State of the European Union – Best Results in 5 Years.”

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle Kallis, “Mainstreaming of Radical Right,” *Insight Turkey*, 20, no. 3 (2018): 61-76.

long held monopoly of traditional and established political parties, and ability to effect a radical change in the working system of the EU. Nonetheless, this trend does not necessarily indicate or suggest that the EU is at the verge of collapse.

The outcome of 2019 European parliamentary elections strengthens the argument that the EU is not a failing project, but a project undergoing evolution and steady transition—a transition that cannot preclude the challenges of populism. The EU is merely evolving and passing through a transitory phase, even with the tough populist critiques of the Union, it is still a symbol of regionalism.

While some scholars question the legality of the EU, that does not dismiss the transitional process of the EU:

...the evolution of the European community in the last six decades speaks a lot about a transitional, steady, resilience and formidable community paddling through developments and crises, supposedly sinking, but resurfacing formidably.<sup>41</sup>

Long before the crises that animated recent populist wave, Philippe Schmitter argued for a different understanding of the EU. His argument cautioned against the utility of a common analytical yardstick to understand a regional organization and a nation-state. Such practice conflates the two and blurs their distinctions. Schmitter posits that the EU remains 'an emerging polity with certain distinctive features' that must not be contrasted with the prevailing nation-states.<sup>42</sup> Such position reinforces the argument that the EU as an institution is in transition, rather than being an exhausted transnational political entity.

The EU is almost making it to its seventy years of existence and evolution and it is unlikely that given such decades of resilience and fortitude, the Union can become vulnerable to existential challenges of collapse. The fact that the Union has not ceased to function as a regional organization amidst multiple crises in recent years, speaks of its level of endurance and ability to transform vulnerability into opportunity. Following the Eurozone crisis, the political resolve and determination of EU elites was tested, but eventually the crisis invariably reinforces the argument that the EU is in a metamorphosis rather than failing or failed, hence, Fromage and Van den Brink claim that the 'Eurozone has become a clearer layer in economic governance; the European Council has

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<sup>41</sup> Bakare, "EU in Transition or a Failed Project?" 84.

<sup>42</sup> Schmitter, *How to Democratize the European Union...and why Bother?*

appeared as the main agenda setter to initiate the major changes; the Banking Union has been created<sup>43</sup> for greater economic performance. Besides, the crises drew the EU towards maturity, foresightedness on issues, deeper and more convincing integration.<sup>44</sup>

Second, talks of exiting the EU has been added to the list of reasons why the Union is on the failing path. Rather than considering exit as failure, it should be seen as part of the evolution and transition. Of all the exit frenzy, the Brexit remains popular. The indecisiveness surrounding the Brexit exposes the complexity of leaving the Union. This is not to say that the Union is a 'rigid federalism or divine association' that can never be exited, rather the indecisiveness on part of the British elites and the realization that exiting the Union is far complicated from how it was spontaneously thought and construed.

Even when Brexit is carefully calibrated as an elite project - a tug of war between the Europhobic and pro-EU elites, the British public remains the pawn in the game of power politics. It has exposed the fault line within the political establishment of the United Kingdom (UK). It has somewhat contributed to the political wrangling within the Conservative party, instrumental in the exit of Prime Minister Theresa May, hardened the Labour party, gave birth to Brexit party, led by Nigel Farage, and more importantly, the confession of David Cameron, his accord to an unnecessary Brexit referendum, the division and frustration, it has caused the British people, and for which some people 'will never forgive' him.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the Brexit political drama also created a politico-constitutional crisis, a clash between the judiciary and executive arms of the government. Premised on the prorogation of the parliament by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, which the UK Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional. The ruling further exposes the depth of frustration associated with Brexit and the acrimony of the Boris Johnson-led government that sees the issue as strictly political and non-judicial.<sup>46</sup> Beyond London, Brexit has equally generated a contentious relation between London and Dublin, over Ireland status, should Brexit

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<sup>43</sup> Fromage and Brink, "Democratic Legitimation of EU Economic Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for European Legislatures," 235.

<sup>44</sup> Ludger Kühnhardt, ed., *Crises in European Integration: Challenges and Response, 1945-2005* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Duarte Mendonca, Augusta Anthony and Ivana Kottasová, "David Cameron says Some People 'Will Never Forgive' him for Brexit," *CNN*, September 14, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/14/uk/brexit-david-cameron-gbr-intl/index.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Owen Bowcott, Ben Quinn and Severin Carrell, "Johnson's Suspension of Parliament Unlawful, Supreme Court Rules," *Guardian*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2019/sep/24/boris-johnsons-suspension-of-parliament-unlawful-supreme-court-rules-prorogue>.

eventually become a reality. Same is true for the frustration Brexit has caused to the Scots.<sup>47</sup>

It is plausible to argue that the political imbroglio in London might quench the urge of similar exit intentions elsewhere in Europe. Interestingly, Frank Langfitt believes that the Domino effect of the Brexit has failed to materialize as largely expected 'instead of becoming a harbinger of the EU's demise, the UK descended into political chaos and became a cautionary tale for other EU countries.'<sup>48</sup> Hence, instead of harming the EU, the unintended action of populism is nonetheless strengthening the EU, not driving it toward disintegration.

It is equally conceivable that the inconclusive, complex, and complicated business of Brexit, is likely to generate a ripple effect and room for second thought amongst those opting to leave the Union. It must be clear by now that as much as economic independence is a matter of sovereign integrity, being part of an economic and financial Union also comes with huge benefits and costs, at both individual and institutional level. The experience of the EU over the last several decades shows that benefits come with costs. Even when the Eurobarometer pinpoints the grievances of EU citizens towards the EU institutions, the relevance of the EU has not totally diminished, as large amount of European citizens still prefer that their countries stay in the EU.<sup>49</sup> This is substantiated by PEW research report that noted a favorable European attitude towards EU in post-Brexit political climate.<sup>50</sup> The citizens might want a better democratic and independent decisionmaking on several issues, particularly issues closer to individual public sentiments. Such sentiments (in view of most Europeans) should not be the business of the EU. For instance, in the same PEW report, when asked whether they would like their national government to make decisions about the movement of people into their country and trade with other nations, roughly half or more across the countries surveyed answered, 'Yes.'<sup>51</sup> The report proves that populism might have tried, but has not been capable enough to disengage (more Europeans) from the

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<sup>47</sup> Libby Brooks and Poppy Noor, "'I Feel Frustrated': the Brexit View from Edinburgh and Hastings," *Guardian*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/mar/15/i-feel-frustrated-mps-leave-edinburgh-and-hastings-reeling-over-brexit-commons-remain-leave>.

<sup>48</sup> Langfitt, "Here's Why Brexit Wasn't Followed by Frexit, Swexit or Nexit."

<sup>49</sup> "No to Nexit: Dutch Most Likely to Vote to Stay in the EU," *Dutch News*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2019/04/no-to-nexit-dutch-most-likely-to-vote-to-stay-in-the-eu/>.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Stokes, Richard Wike, and Dorothy Manevich, *Post-Brexit, Europeans More Favourable Toward EU*, report (Washington, D.C.: PEW Research Center, 2017), 4, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/06/15/post-brexit-europeans-more-favorable-toward-eu/>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Union, hence, inasmuch as the favorability remains, disintegrating the Union is farfetched. Besides, no populist politician(s) or group would want to act against the will of the people they 'claim' to be their vanguard.

Thirdly, populist political parties are not different from religious political parties, which at some point in their evolution reject the notion of being part of political dispensation. They would criticize politics as an unholy enterprise of the establishment and must be shunned and eschewed. But following the realization that only through political participation, the transformation of unholy to holy can be a manifest reality. This is true of many religious social movements that transformed into political parties, particularly in Muslim societies. These religious parties are bent at making transformation from within. Though European populist parties might not necessarily reject politics or democracy having common dissatisfaction for the system, establishment and also conceive change (through their own prism) to be meaningful which can be accomplished by staying within, not outside the system. If the populists were truly bent at seeing the demise of the EU, they would rather not assiduously work to gain more seats in a parliament they so much despise. It defeats logic to believe and participate in the mechanical process of a system considered illegitimate and unpopular.

In this regard, Table 1, shows and contrasts the performance of the populist (radical) fraternity in 2014 and 2019 EU parliamentary elections. The table delineates a fairly good performance of populist parties in 2019. Out of the 751 seats in the European parliament, the populist parties hold 188 seats, 25 percent more than they gained in 2014 elections. For the far-right parties, the elections were undoubtedly a test of their legitimacy. The election results show that some populist parties performed better in few EU countries compared to others at the national level; their representation in the European parliament, nonetheless remains noticeable. The outcome of the election is suggestive that we are witnessing a transformation of the EU and a transition to a juncture, where the old dominant ideology and culture will cease to be dominant, as radical populist mantra gains more traction and footing in the EU parliament, a new direction and cause will be set for the Union. The Union might eventually be having a more constructivist-conservative-nationalist outlook. EU's domestic and foreign policy will invariably be affected by the new attitude. Such scenario defeats any argument of a failing or failed EU, but echoes a Union which is evolving, devoid of the dominance of oligarch few, but represented by multiple political entities.

**Table 1:** Outcome of the EU Parliament Elections 2014 and 2019

Name of Eight Alliances in the EU Parliament and 'other'	Numbers of Seats		Percentage	
	2014	2019	2014	2019
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	52	41	6.92%	5.46%
Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	191	153	25.43%	20.37%
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	50	75	6.66%	9.99%
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)	67	106	8.92%	14.11%
European People's party (EPP)	221	179	29.43%	23.83%
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	70	60	9.32%	7.99%
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) (RIGHTWING)	48	43	6.39%	5.73%
Non-attached Members (NI) + Independent MEPs + Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) in 2014  In 2019, the ENF is transformed into Identity and Democracy group (ID) which held 73 seats	52	73	6.92%	9.72%
Non-attached Members (NI)		8		1.07%
Others		13		1.73%
Total	751	751		

**Source:** EP, "Results of the 2014 European Elections" (Brussels: European Parliament, 2014), accessed December 10, 2019, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html>; and EP, "2019 European Election Results" (Brussels: European Parliament, 2019), accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.election-results.eu>.

The table above shows the official results of 2014 and 2019 elections respectively posted on the EU website.

Fourthly, contrary to popular opinion that the EU is on the verge of collapse, it is argued that the activity of populist parties rather supports the existence of the EU than see it collapsing. The populists have demonstrated ability to galvanize popular sentiments for their cause(s) and hence made significant feat during the last EU parliamentary elections. Populist parties might have been skeptical of EU however, instead of disintegrating the EU, they are instrumentalizing it. For argument's sake, if the populist parties believe the EU has long been used by the establishment to erode sovereignty of states and therefore strengthening the authority of (EU) institutions, there is nothing wrong if they do the same - instrumentalizing the Union from within, if they can control the EU parliament.

The above discussion further reinforces that populism does not want the disintegration, but implicitly supports the evolution and transition of the Union. In the event that populist seats increase to a majority or sizeable proportion in the EU parliament, they would rather be doing same thing they have accused the established parties of doing for quite a long time. Controlling the Union from within means the ability to control the happenings in the member states. Even if the populist parties eventually take over the control of the EU parliament, it is unlikely they will call for the dissolution of the regional legislative house, instead, the parliament will simply embrace a different ethos and ideological direction, which might not necessarily be favorable or in harmony with EU's established international standing.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of how the EU would be steered, even a populist dominated EU parliament needs the Union to remain relevant and powerful in global politics. For almost seven decades, continental Europe has navigated global competition fairly well through the leverage and bargaining power to the EU, thus, for that to continue, rational and sensible populist dominated EU parliament is unlikely to forfeit such bargaining power.

## **Conclusion**

The gain of the far-right parties, even if marginal, underscores how they have growingly marked their niche to become a constitutive unit of Europe's mainstream political parties. The fact that some of these parties raise their profile beyond 2014 elections speaks well of them, though marginally below the wave of anticipated success they had constructed long before the elections. In its euphoria, the populist fraternity had become convinced it could defeat the traditional and

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<sup>52</sup> Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka, "The 2019 European Election: How Anti-Europeans Plan to Wreck Europe and What Can Be Done to Stop It" (paper, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, 2019), [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/EUROPEAN\\_PARLIAMENT\\_FLASH\\_SCORECARD\\_.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/EUROPEAN_PARLIAMENT_FLASH_SCORECARD_.pdf).

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established political parties with sizeable margin, but the outcome of 2019 EU election speaks otherwise. Meanwhile, there has been a misreading of European populism, of being committed towards the disintegration of the Union; in fact, their actions speak louder than their rhetoric. The commitment to participate in election, to change and govern the EU from within, defeats the whole logic and mantra of populism as the force, bent at ending the existence of the Union.

While the possibility of causing a radical change in European political landscape remains a distant endeavor, still, it is incontestable that the populist fraternity is a reckonable force that can disturb the oligopoly of the traditional established political parties and more particularly, a political force with certain degree of public legitimacy. The result of 2019 election did not simply identified losers and gainers, it also lays bare the erosion and fragmentation of power from the hitherto power houses. As populism garners momentum, the pro-EU parties have allowed themselves to be saturated by the discourse of populism to an extent of getting contaminated. The pro-EU have allowed the anti-EU to take the lead in framing the debate. For the sake of continuous evolution of the EU, pro-EU parties will not only have to simply retake the steering, it must also liquidate the factors that led to the rise of populism. Populism is 'stoked' and nurtured by certain factors; as long as the factors are allowed to animate and become potential source of public discomfort – populism will ever remain spirited.