

Fighting against populism is everybody's business, says EESC Diversity Europe Group



Economic progress and social stability are two key elements in the fight against Euroscepticism but they alone are not enough: civil society needs to get involved!

At the presentation of the study “Societies outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism”, held on 20 February 2019 in Brussels, the EESC Diversity Europe Group reviewed the rise of populism in the EU, analysing how and why it had emerged, and highlighting the key role that civil society can play in countering it.

Currently, populism in Europe is at its highest level since the 1930s. The average populist vote in the EU Member States now stands at 24%, up from 8.5% in 2000. Right- or left-wing populists are members of numerous European governments while, in other Member States, populists also influence the agenda, as members of the opposition, forcing moderate parties to embrace extremist policies. In this context, Euroscepticism is often the direct result of populist resentment.

While economic progress and social stability have an essential part to play in addressing the concerns that give rise to Euroscepticism, these factors alone are not enough. Civil society organisations have to take action to communicate a more positive message about the value and importance of Europe and to bring Europe closer to its citizens. “The preservation of liberal democracy is everyone’s business,” said the President of the EESC Diversity Europe Group, **Arno Metzler**. “I believe that the only way to counter populism is through our democratic system, the very system that populists are trying to undermine: the EU must not only speak to people but must actively listen and engage in dialogue. European civil society should help the Union to reach out to citizens, thus preventing and limiting the appeal of populist parties,” he continued.

[Research](#) shows that economic decline, social instability and limited levels of education are some of the most significant factors behind the increase in support for populists throughout the EU. However, other more complex and interdependent issues also need to be considered, such as the desire to preserve the status quo and the need to protect traditional values, monocultures or particular identities.

The study was commissioned by the Diversity Europe Group from the European Citizen Action Service ([ECAS](#)) and involved extensive desk research, two statistical analyses, 616 survey responses, three focus groups and 54 in-depth interviews with civil society organisations and experts. It compares two regions with a high populist vote from four EU countries, with one of the

regions in each case being at the lower end of the scale and the other at the higher end:

- **Austria: Klagenfurt-Villach and Niederösterreich-Süd;**
- **France: Drôme and Aisne;**
- **Italy: Udine and Reggio di Calabria;**
- **Poland: Płocki and Nowosądecki.**

“Populism and Euroscepticism have to be combatted, first of all, at national level,” concluded **Mr Metzler**. “As members of the EESC, we have a double responsibility: we have to step up our activities to link the European level and the national level and to work more closely together. Only by strengthening networks, by offering a better explanation of Europe’s important role and by bringing “Europe” closer to its citizens can we help to reduce the misplaced fears that populists are so successfully manipulating”.

Background

For further information on the activities of the EESC Diversity Europe Group, please consult our [website](#).