

## Populist and nationalist parties pose ‘significant threat’ in EU elections, warns MEP

Written by Martin Banks on 23 January 2019 in News  
News

Polish EPP MEP Danuta Huebner has warned of the “significant threat” posed by populist and nationalist political parties in the upcoming [European elections](#) [1].



*Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) European election meeting | Photo credit: Press Association*

Huebner pointed to recent data which says that populist parties have more than tripled their support in Europe in the last 20 years, securing enough votes to put their leaders into government posts in 11 countries and challenging the established political order across the continent.

The steady growth in support for European populist parties, particularly on the right, is revealed in an analysis of their performance in national elections in 31 European countries over two decades, conducted by more than 30 leading political scientists.

The data shows that populism has been consistently on the rise since at least 1998. Two decades ago, populist parties were largely a marginal force, accounting for just 7 percent of votes across the continent; in the most recent national elections, one in four votes cast was for a populist party.

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"We know now that 25 percent of Europeans already vote for the populist parties ... This is staggering, when compared with the 7 percent the populists polled in 1998. It shows that a certain 'immunological barrier' has been broken in the electorate," Huebner told this website.

"In the context of the European elections in May, getting over 25 percent may mean that populist parties will cross a threshold of legitimacy. No longer will they just be a disrupter but a valid political actor in the new political arrangement after the election."

"They may have enough power to block the efficient work of the Parliament in legislative and procedural terms and to increase the level of animosity among the political families. What is even worse, they could substantially change the nature of the discourse about Europe," she added.

The findings of the study come a few months before European parliamentary elections that some are predicting could return more right-wing populists than ever to the 751-seat chamber.

"In the context of the European elections in May, getting over 25 percent may mean that populist parties will cross a threshold of legitimacy. No longer will they just be a disrupter but a valid political actor in the new political arrangement after the election" **Danuta Huebner MEP**

Matthijs Rooduijn, a political sociologist at the University of Amsterdam, who led the research project, said, "Not so long ago populism was a phenomenon of the political fringes. Today it has become increasingly mainstream."

Huebner, a former EU commissioner went on to say, "We have already in our national political lives given too much permission to anti-European rhetoric of the current leaders in Hungary, Poland and Italy. This is one of the results of this lowering of the immunological barrier. They [the populists] can practically roam free on their national arenas without much opposition."

"I do not want to sound overly melodramatic, but the European Parliament is one of the crucial sites of resistance to the populist forces and, for the health of European democracy, it has to stay that way."

"We have only a few months before the elections, and it would be very difficult to change the dynamics, which currently leads toward gains by the populists. We, nevertheless, have to mobilise the

forces of the civil society to stop the normalising of the anti-European discourse in the European public space.”

She continued, "One particular aspect that concerns me in a special way is the danger of losing our European values, especially the negative impact that the populist surge in the Parliament may have on the lives of women.”

“Gender equality policies of the EU are especially under attack by the populist as the easiest way to attack liberal democracy.”

"It is obvious to me that the populists in the Parliament will coordinate massive mobilisation across the international right wing that would result in significant pressure on limiting protection of our rights, including women’s rights. It is already happening on the national level in countries like Poland, for example.”

“Not so long ago populism was a phenomenon of the political fringes. Today it has become increasingly mainstream” **Matthijs Rooduijn, University of Amsterdam**

"The policy of enacting gender equality and mainstreaming women’s rights will also be threatened by reducing or even cancelling programmes in this area, including their financing - this is a truly frightening perspective.”

“Thus, the populist threat in the upcoming elections concerns not only particular policies but also policies as expressions of our values," Huebner concluded.

Elections in the first half of 2019 will provide further scope to chart the rise of populism, from Ukraine to Denmark and Finland to Belgium, said Cas Mudde, a professor in international affairs at the University of Georgia.

“In the short term, populist parties will probably stay roughly this strong, although they will be even more clearly radical right, and there will remain significant regional and national differences,” Mudde said, adding, “The main question is how non-populist parties are responding.”

## **About the author**

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