

“Mapping and  
responding to  
the rising culture  
and politics of fear in  
the European Union...”

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**NOTHING TO FEAR  
BUT FEAR ITSELF?**

Summary Report

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**DEMOS**



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# Foreword

*Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself?* was conceived on the idea that Europe – which at the time (in 2015) was thoroughly bogged down with the migrant crisis, economic crisis and a counter-terror crisis – was also experiencing a new type of crisis. One less visible, but with the potential to become just as important. In the declining level of political engagement and trust, the growth of populist parties and anti-immigrant sentiment, we saw a common thread of fear weaving its way through European societies, with the potential to foster a divisive new political culture, to destabilise democratic governance, and to challenge the ‘liberal consensus’ of modern times. Even so, 18 months ago we could not have imagined we would ever arrive where we are now.

This project has sought to capture a snapshot of the common and unique manifestations of fear and insecurity across Europe in a moment that feels particularly important. There is a sense that we are standing on the edge of a new era, one where the core tenets of the past half-century – of representative democracy as an inherent good, of unfettered globalisation, of greater mixing of people, goods and ideas across the world – are being held to trial, challenged, and potentially turned away from all together. Just as the changes our European societies have experienced in absorbing this age of free trade, movement and ideas have fostered fears and insecurities, so too does the next phase ahead feel uncertain and uncharted – particularly for those who felt safe in what we had before.

It is clear that the era we are leaving has caused some parts of our societies to feel disenfranchised and disconnected. Too many political leaders, from both the left and the right, have viewed success in primarily economic terms, and have missed simmering social and cultural crises that can feel more important to ordinary people’s day-to-day lives. The sense of

being displaced or ignored, the demoralising impact of precarious work, the loss of culture and community, the feeling of no longer belonging where you once felt at home. Even now, as this research shows, these concerns are often dismissed as intangible, or ‘emotional’ in nature – as if not being able to be measured empirically, or addressed through the traditional prisms of public policy, somehow impeaches their significance.

The political upheavals we have witnessed throughout the course of the project – and the ones that are perhaps yet to come – should underscore to any politicians or institutions the risk that is posed to stability, openness and cohesion by allowing citizens’ fears to bud and flourish. Let us be clear: this is not the time to turn our backs on the many achievements that have also been made over recent decades – not least of all in social liberalism; improved equality of opportunity across gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation; education; international cooperation; conservation; technology, health and innovation. These gains need to be defended, and further advanced, even in the face of growing authoritarian and nationalist attitudes. What is evident from this research project is that this will only be possible if we recognise and address the insecurities plaguing so many citizens’ lives, because – as humans – we are at our most altruistic, generous, inclusive and community-minded when we feel safe.

I would like to first thank the Open Societies Foundation, and in particular Christal Morehouse, Goran Buldioski and Heather Grabbe, for their unfailing support for this project. I would also like to thank the scores of immensely bright, perceptive and enthusiastic people who have contributed to this project across Europe, including journalists, think tankers, NGO staff, politicians, academics, policy-makers and civil society organisations. The issues addressed in this project are bigger than all of us, and the generous spirit of collaboration from a broad consortium of stakeholders is tremendously encouraging. I am grateful to our partner organisations – d|part in Germany, the Jacques Delors Institute in France, FORES in Sweden, the Institute

of Public Affairs in Poland and the Elcano Institute in Spain, who have produced such high quality research, and worked so closely with us throughout this project. At Demos, I recognise the outstanding contribution of our chief executive Claudia Wood, as well as research colleagues Peter Harrison-Evans and Sacha Hilhorst, and Alex Porter. Ralph Scott and Charlie Cadywould, who have since moved on to other organisations, were also integral to this project and key authors on the UK case study.

As always, any errors or omissions in this report as a whole remain those of the authors.

Sophie Gaston, Demos  
2017

# Introduction

There is a spectre haunting Europe: a culture of fear that is finding its form and asserting its growing influence in myriad ways.

This is a fear of the unknown: a fear of the other, a fear of the future. Its political consequences have been shown most starkly in the UK's vote to leave the European Union, and the electoral success of authoritarian governments in central Europe. However, fear is also taking hold of the politics of other European nations, marked by the growing success of other 'populist' right-wing and Eurosceptic parties, including the Front National, Alternative für Deutschland, and the Swedish Democrats, as well as the rise of street movements such as the anti-Islamic Pegida. This new populist politics is having tangible effects on national public policy, through tighter border controls, the erosion of liberal freedoms and so-called 'welfare chauvinism', where social security eligibility is made ever-stricter. Its social impact can be seen in the increasingly nativist and 'othering' discourse in the public realm; the disintegration of civil society and declining social trust; and the resurgence of exclusive national and regional identities.

The drivers of this are as multifarious and indeterminate as their effects. If 'fear' does not quite do it justice, then perhaps we are talking about what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls *Unsicherheit* – 'that complex combination of uncertainty, insecurity, and lack of safety' which results from the economic, social and cultural consequences of globalisation, and their entanglement with national, regional and local contexts.

Some drivers and symptoms of the politics of fear are, therefore, specific to particular regions or countries, however many exhibit some level of commonality across EU member states. It seems clear, then, that this is not an isolated

phenomenon with causes to be unpicked, but is part of a wider rising tide that cuts across traditional geographic, political, and analytical boundaries. This fear threatens not only the transnational solidarity underpinning the European project, but the stability of free and open societies across Europe.

This project led by the think tank Demos, working in partnership with think tanks and academic researchers in five other European countries, has set out to explore this culture of fear, understand its influence on social and political attitudes and behaviour, and develop ideas to tackle it. Through cross-national, as well as country-specific, polling, supplemented by qualitative research, this study maps the current political landscape and provides a detailed analysis of public attitudes across France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. By drawing together this analysis we assess the way forward for political leaders to restore a more positive and inclusive political culture within individual nation-states and across the European Union.

## Our approach

The starting premise for our research contends that the politics and culture of fear cannot be treated as a discrete phenomenon to be studied in isolation but must instead be observed through the analysis of other social and political trends. With this in mind we identified five key themes to frame our subsequent investigation:

- *party politics*: the rise of populist parties and ‘anti-politics’, with declining trust and participation in electoral politics
- *public policy*: restrictions on citizenship and access to public services and welfare, rising state authoritarianism, and an increased reliance on directly democratic decision-making
- *social cohesion*: declining social cohesion, particularly between different ethnic and religious groups, and real and perceived problems of social integration
- *political narratives and rhetoric*: changes in public discourse – whether media framing, the rhetoric employed by politicians

or through social media – with an increase in ‘othering’ language and framing

- *citizens*: including perceptions of identity, rising exclusive nationalist sentiments, and feelings of pessimism and insecurity

We selected six EU member states – France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK – to act as a barometer through which to analyse and explore these five core themes. These six countries were chosen, in part, to represent a breadth of experiences and outcomes across the EU – for example, when looking at party politics our case studies reflect a range of circumstances from the electoral victory of an authoritarian populist party in Poland to a relative absence of right-wing populists in Spain. However, we also selected countries which help to highlight emerging and common trends across Europe – on narrative, for example, we have seen a turn towards more nationalistic political discourse in many of our chosen countries – from a greater emphasis on ‘Swedish values’ by populist and mainstream politicians in Sweden, to the nationalistic, and at times xenophobic, campaigning around the EU referendum in the UK.

Our overarching method has been to establish common research questions and approaches across the countries, while also conducting more detailed country-specific analysis, employing a range of different research methodologies. As well as working with our research partners, we have also sought input from a wider group of academic, policy and civil society leaders and experts through a series of workshops, which have helped frame the research, explore emerging findings and develop possible solutions. The study’s methodology can, therefore, be broken down into three constituent parts:

- *Cross-national polling*: Demos commissioned YouGov to conduct an online survey of adults (aged 18 and over) across our six countries (UK polling did not survey adults in Northern Ireland, therefore when referring to polling we use the term Great Britain). The polling asked common questions



across all six countries, with a focus on public attitudes to the EU, globalisation, societal changes (eg increasing diversity), and political leadership and trust. Samples across the six countries were weighted to ensure the findings were representative of national populations.<sup>1</sup>

- *National case study research:* Demos commissioned case studies produced by independent think tanks in five of the six countries, with Demos conducting the case study research for the UK. The case studies used additional country-specific polling (with additional questions added to the cross-national survey conducted by YouGov), combined with a range of different methodologies, including qualitative interviews with politicians (Germany), regression modelling (UK), and discourse and textual analysis (Sweden and Poland).
- *Expert workshops:* Demos convened workshops in Brussels with academic, policy and civil society leaders and experts from the six case study countries, together with delegates with Europe-wide expertise, including EU policy leaders and journalists. The first workshop involved facilitated discussion around the five key themes, to provide expert input to frame and guide the subsequent polling and case study research. The second workshop was conducted over two days, during the first of which delegates debated emergent findings of the research, while the second focused on gaining insights about potential policy and civil society responses.

In the following sections of this chapter we set out the current political context behind this research, discuss the findings of the cross-national polling, and give an introduction to the six country case studies.

# Context and background

The current era is one of rapid, and at times bewildering, political and social change, in which there have been significant shifts in public opinion over a short space of time, together with seismic events that have confounded expert predictions. It increasingly feels as if crisis after crisis rattle through the political and media landscape, leaving pre-existing institutions with little time to adapt. Fear is often both a product of and a response to this pace of change, contributing to a growing sense of precariousness and anxiety among European publics, at times exploited by insurgent or even mainstream political figures.

There is, therefore, a growing sense of urgency in the need to understand the drivers and symptoms of rapidly shifting tides across our five thematic areas – party politics, policy, society, narrative and individual identity – and build coalitions across disciplinary and political divides to develop effective responses. Below we review the current picture across the five themes, as the first step to getting to grips with the current situation.

## **Party politics**

While 2016 has been widely viewed as the year in which authoritarian populist politics broke through to the ‘mainstream’, the steady rise of populist parties across Europe can be traced back to at least the European elections of 2009, when the likes of the British National Party, Hungary’s Jobbik, the Austrian Freedom Party and the True Finns made significant electoral inroads. By the 2014 European elections the gains made by populist parties were brought into far sharper relief. In France, Marine Le Pen’s Front National topped the polls, while anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP) won the most votes in the UK. There were similar

trends in Austria, where the Freedom Party increased its vote share, Germany, where the new party Alternative für Deutschland won its first seats, Italy, with initial success for Grillo's Five Star Movement, and many other countries.<sup>2</sup>

In the years since 2014 successes in European elections have increasingly been replicated in populist gains in national and regional elections. This has been most starkly shown through the victory of the Law and Justice party in the 2015 Polish parliamentary elections. However, there have also been significant gains for other populist parties, across Europe. In Germany, for example, anti-European Alternative für Deutschland received double-digit shares of the vote in all the regional elections in March 2016, before surging to 21 per cent in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in September 2016, finishing above the Christian Democratic Union in Angela Merkel's home state. In Austria, the 2016 presidential election between the Green Party's Alexander Van der Bellen and the far-right Freedom Party's Norbert Hofer was notable. First, it was the first time since the Second World War that an Austrian president had not been backed by either of the two establishment parties. Second, while there was widespread international relief that Van der Bellen claimed victory in the re-run of the election in December, this still left 46 per cent of the vote going to the far-right candidate. In the UK, while UKIP was restricted to just one seat in the 2015 general election thanks to the first-past-the-post electoral system, the party managed to gain nearly 13 per cent of the popular vote.

It is worth noting that despite often being referred to as 'far right', many of these groups are not easily placed according to traditional political categories, often combining elements of left-wing and right-wing philosophy, mixed with populist language and rhetoric. For example, under Marine Le Pen, the Front National has campaigned from a strongly left-wing position on welfare, while taking a far-right position on immigration. In some ways, this leaves these parties with a greater capacity to capitalise on the changing contours of national political debates. Recent referendums have produced voting patterns which cut across traditional party lines, and this highlights the waning of the left-right paradigm as the

major dividing line in politics, with others schisms – such as young vs old, educated vs uneducated, open vs closed (or in Le Pen’s words, ‘globalists’ vs ‘patriots’) – becoming increasingly significant.

That said, there have also been major gains for anti-establishment, populist parties from a more resolutely left-wing position, including Podemos in Spain, and most notably Syriza in Greece. ‘Populist’ is therefore an all-embracing term that brings together very different political entities. However, while the term ‘populism’ is not without its conceptual problems, populist parties at the very broadest level tend to have a similar world view, one defined by prominent political scientist Cas Mudde as:

*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.<sup>3</sup>*

For left-wing populist parties, this concept of ‘the people’ may be framed particularly to exclude financial elites, using language such as the ‘99 per cent’. For right-wing populist parties, ‘the people’ is typically bound to the idea of the nation, which may exclude non-elite groups such as welfare recipients, immigrants and ethnic and religious minorities (albeit often constructed as receiving undeserved support from elites).<sup>4</sup> In both cases, however, growing populist support reflects a deep distrust in, or a rejection of, the current political system, which represents a substantial challenge to mainstream parties.

## **Public policy**

Anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic rhetoric is exerting an influence on policy across Europe. In some cases this is the result of populist parties in government. For example, once in power the Law and Justice party reversed the previous government’s pledge to accept 7,000 refugees, citing concerns around terrorism and disease; Jaroslaw Kaczynsk accused

refugees of ‘bringing in all kinds of parasites’.<sup>5</sup> In June 2016, Poland also passed new anti-terrorism laws introducing measures such as the wiretapping of foreign citizens without a court order. Critics argue that these laws are inconsistent with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Some commentators have argued that this combination of anti-immigrant and authoritarian policy change seen in Poland reflects the Law and Justice party ‘learning from the Hungarians’ in their approach.<sup>6</sup> Since regaining the premiership in 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been criticised for cracking down on media freedom and political accountability, as well as exploiting terrorist attacks in Europe to spread fear and promote Islamophobia and a narrow, ethnic nationalism. The policy agendas of both governments have brought them into open conflict with the European Union – Hungary for its treatment of migrants, and Poland for changes to the country’s constitutional court and state media – which have led to threats to sanction these countries under Article 7 for violating fundamental EU rights.

Even where populist parties have not formed governments, the politics of fear has asserted its influence on policy through restrictions on welfare and social security provision, driven in part by financial constraints, but also a more politicised weakening of social bonds and solidarity. A number of states have recently attempted to tighten eligibility rules for immigrants. This was at the forefront of David Cameron’s EU renegotiation (a now largely academic exercise), which included an ‘emergency brake’ on in-work benefits for EU migrants. Welfare chauvinism towards migrants is part of a wider and much longer-running trend towards tightening eligibility and reduced generosity in many countries’ welfare regimes, however.

Austerity policies, largely implemented by establishment parties in the wake of the financial crisis, have led to significant falls in welfare spending in many countries. According to the OECD’s social expenditure index, spending to gross domestic product (GDP) ratios declined between 2009 and 2014 by 1.5 to 2.5 percentage points in Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland and the UK.<sup>7</sup> In Greece, the impact

of austerity measures imposed by the troika of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund led to a sharp fall in spending-to-GDP of 2 percentage points in just two years. In 2016 alone, Greece slashed public spending by €5.7 billion.<sup>8</sup>

More fundamentally, there has also been a restructuring of the social contract in many countries, and a re-imagining of what constitutes a deserving or undeserving welfare recipient. This is linked to longer-running trends towards the activating welfare state, which places greater emphasis on active labour market policies and benefit conditionality. German academics Peter Bleses and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser have described the ‘dual transformation’ of the German welfare state, which has experienced a significant expansion of family policy (to support female labour market participation), combined with a far-reaching retrenchment in unemployment protection.<sup>9</sup>

The policy direction of governments is both shaping and being shaped by public opinion, which in many cases has hardened on welfare. According to the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey, 45 per cent of people said that spending on unemployment benefit should be reduced and 60 per cent said unemployment benefit receipt should be time limited.<sup>10</sup> The recent British Social Attitudes Survey also found that 61 per cent of people agreed that a working-age couple without children who are struggling to make ends meet should ‘look after themselves’, rather than getting government support to boost their wages. While Britain may be somewhat of an outlier on welfare solidarity, academics Paul de Beer and Ferry Koster have argued that there is, at least, a broader shift across Europe from one-sided solidarity (assisting someone else without expecting anything in return) to two-sided solidarity, playing into narratives of a ‘something for something’ culture.<sup>11</sup> Levels of social trust have been shown to be a key ingredient of public support for the welfare state – therefore the divisive political rhetoric that typifies the politics of fear represents a substantial threat to the social contract across Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Against a backdrop of an ever-present threat of terrorism, it is not surprisingly that many leaders are

themselves embodying the fear of their citizens in hardening security and migration practices. Border checks and controls have been re-imposed in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway and Sweden.<sup>13</sup> However, the response to the migration crisis also reflects fears more related to a sense of erosion of cultural and social identity. Some governments, with the notable exception of Germany, have refused to take large numbers of refugees, in part due to the fear of losing support to populist parties.

The current political landscape in Denmark, with a right-wing minority government, dependent on support from the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, has encouraged a hard-line position on refugees, out of step with the country's reputation as a bastion of social democratic generosity. Denmark's response to the refugee crisis has become defined by a series of controversial measures, including the slashing of refugee benefits, placing advertising in Lebanese newspapers urging refugees not to come, and most notably the passing of a law which enables the authorities to seize refugees' cash and valuables. Most recently, the Danish government has indefinitely suspended a programme to receive around 500 refugees per year through the UN Refugee Agency.<sup>14</sup>

Populist rhetoric has exerted an influence on the broader policy agendas of mainstream governments and political parties, which have often taken what Matthew Goodwin terms an 'adoptive' strategy to responding to populist insurgencies.<sup>15</sup> In France, for example, measures have been put in place to reduce access to citizenship, so that now the children of immigrants no longer gain citizenship at birth, but at the age of 18, and only once they show themselves to be 'well assimilated to customs and manners'. The national government in France has been unable to challenge successfully the highly controversial ban on burkinis on public beaches, which was introduced in over 30 municipalities.

Finally, it is also important to recognise recent changes to the policy process itself that are influenced by this culture and politics of fear. Declining trust in politicians generally and an increased emphasis on a 'purer' (more direct) form

of democracy has led governments across Europe to respond positively to calls for more referendums.<sup>16</sup> In the 1970s, Europe averaged just three referendums a year – *The Economist* estimates that figure to now stand at eight. In 2016 alone, there were major referendums in the Netherlands (on the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement), the UK (on EU membership), Italy (on its constitution) and Hungary (on migrant quotas).

The growth in the number of referendums can be seen to reflect politicians promoting a more inclusive form of politics, but they have been proven in many cases to encourage divisive public discourse built around binary narratives, and are largely considered unsuitable as a mechanism for most complex or constitutional matters – particularly if there is little chance that citizens can be sufficiently educated in the subjects at hand.<sup>17</sup> While encouraging political participation, referendums have the power to destabilise and disempower more deliberative and representative forms of democracy on which most European societies are founded.

## **Social cohesion**

Freedom of movement within Europe, immigration from outside the EU and the ongoing migrant crisis have raised questions about how new arrivals should best be integrated into existing societies. Numerous populist politicians have argued that the pace of change has been too quick, that new arrivals have tended to separate themselves off from the rest of society, and that indigenous cultures are under threat. In December 2016, 45 per cent of respondents to a Eurobarometer survey named immigration as one of their most important concerns at EU level, with 20 per cent naming terrorism, the second most common response.<sup>18</sup>

Whether this apparent lack of integration leads to cultural and social conflict is a matter of fierce debate – and nowhere is the fear of cultural threat felt and exploited more than with Islam. Jeffrey Alexander claims that a backlash against the ‘multiculturalist’ approach to integration began in the mid-1990s, and sped up following 9/11. In 2008 David Cameron called multiculturalism a ‘dangerous’ and



‘wrong-headed doctrine’, and in recent years French commentators have spoken of ‘Balkanisation’, while the German discussion has used the term ‘parallel societies’.<sup>19</sup> Alexander argues: ‘One European nation after another has shifted... from entertaining a more multicultural to demanding a more assimilative mode of incorporation.’<sup>20</sup>

The Cologne assaults in early January 2016 and incidents of home-grown terrorism have raised the profile of problems of social integration, and linked immigration directly to feelings of physical insecurity. This has been seen in a hardening of attitudes to migrants – particularly in Germany: while only one-third of the population thought that their ‘country already has a large number of foreign nationals or people of foreign origin and it is not possible to host additional immigrants’ in September 2015, that proportion had increased to half by March 2016.

EU citizens are far less likely to feel comfortable working alongside a Muslim (71 per cent) than a Christian (94 per cent), atheist (87 per cent), Jew (84 per cent) or Buddhist (81 per cent). The figure for Muslims is far lower in some countries, such as Czech Republic (just 27 per cent comfortable) and Slovakia (37 per cent comfortable). Similarly, just 50 per cent would feel comfortable with their son or daughter being in a relationship with a Muslim person, with 30 per cent saying they would be uncomfortable. In many countries the numbers are much lower: just 12 per cent of Czech respondents would be comfortable with their son or daughter being in a relationship with a Muslim, with less than half agreeing in many EU-15 countries too: Italy (41 per cent), Germany (43 per cent), Austria (44 per cent) and Belgium (47 per cent).

The most recent Eurobarometer survey on discrimination in the EU gives us some insight into the scale of the problems experienced by minorities. Thirty per cent of participants belonging to an ethnic minority group said they had experienced discrimination or harassment related to their ethnicity in the previous 12 months.<sup>21</sup> Twenty-two per cent of those from a religious minority said they had experienced discrimination or harassment on the grounds of their religion or beliefs.

While often primarily considered in terms of race relations, social cohesion has also been eroding in European countries across other spheres of interaction and relationships. The elections held in 2016, and the campaigns under way in 2017, have exposed a multitude of social and attitudinal schisms across European societies. The traditional binary division in politics based largely on class (blue-collar–white-collar; left–right) has been supplemented, or even superseded, by emerging divisions – between age groups, ethnic groups, graduates and non-graduates, and urban and rural communities – which are increasingly defined by their social values and economic status. There is a sense that social fragmentation is both increasing and hardening, with citizens increasingly unlikely to mix with their counterparts across the new dividing lines.

Education has been shown to be at the centre of many of these emergent social schisms. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the UK found that educational opportunity was ‘the biggest driver’ of the Brexit vote, with 75 per cent of voters with postgraduate qualifications in favour of Remain, and 73 per cent of those without qualifications voting for Leave.<sup>22</sup> While educational divides can be lazily caricatured as the informed vs the unformed, British sociologist David Runciman has written convincingly about the impact of higher education – not in correcting for political or economic ignorance, but instead acting as a socialising force promoting liberal and cosmopolitan values.<sup>23</sup>

While the new dividing lines cut across European countries, where particular social groups stand on key issues can vary markedly between member states. Age, for example, is becoming an increasingly important predictor of attitudes and voting intentions. In Western and Northern Europe younger people tend to have more liberal and internationalist views. However, the reverse is true in parts of Central Europe where younger people have been far more receptive to far-right nationalist rhetoric than older generations. The proportion of young people voting for Jobbik in Hungary, Law and Justice in Poland, and the far-right Kotleba party in Slovakia in recent elections has outstripped that of the wider population.<sup>24</sup>

While the Central European case is perhaps more alarming, growing inter-generational divides on either side of the political spectrum threaten social cohesion, particularly in the context of an ageing population reliant on social security transfers from young to old.

Social fragmentation of values and demographics is in some cases set within more tangible geographic fragmentation driven by secessionist movements, most notably in Scotland and Catalonia. Although these campaigns have so far been defeated or constrained, the Brexit vote has heightened the chances of a second Scottish independence vote, and Carles Puigdemont, the head of the Catalanian government, has insisted that a referendum on independence will take place in September 2017 (in defiance of the Spanish government's position). European and national political leaders clearly fear that success in either of these elections could spark a further disintegration of European political space.

### **Political narratives and rhetoric**

Changing political narratives and language have in part been driven by the rise of populist parties, whose rhetoric has gained increased prominence as a result of electoral success. Populist discourse preys on a sense of precariousness in social and cultural identities through appealing to binary distinctions, encouraging gang-like mentalities that drive cleavages between different groups. These may take the form of hyper-patriotic nationalism against cosmopolitanism; of the 'deserving' recipients of state welfare and users of public services against undeserving interlopers and charlatans; or the authentic, salt-of-the-earth 'people' against the bloated, out-of-touch establishment and ruling elites.

These divisions are powerful in their ability to shape social relations, set a framework for acceptable public debate, and become normalised through mainstream political parties and the media. In their study of political speeches and rhetoric, Ruth Wodak and Salomi Boukala examine speeches given by Geert Wilders and David Cameron in detail.

They argue:

*Debates about European identities – especially since the financial crisis of 2008 – have increasingly been accompanied by debates about both more traditional racialised cultural concerns and more recently, about economic security, leading to new distinctions between ‘Us’, the ‘real Europeans’, and ‘Them’, the ‘Others’.*<sup>25</sup>

The most prominent example of the influence of divisive populist rhetoric has been the mainstreaming of strongly negative depictions of immigrants. Analysis of national newspapers in the UK by the Oxford Migration Observatory showed that the most common descriptor for the word ‘immigrants’ was ‘illegal’. Other consistent terms found nearby in newspaper copy included those around legality and security (‘terrorist’, ‘suspected’, ‘sham’), and those using water-based imagery (‘flood’, ‘influx’, ‘wave’).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Alexander Caviedes’ study of centre-right national newspapers in Britain, France and Italy found that 39 per cent of articles related to immigration had a focus on security between 2008 and 2012. Most of these related to border controls, although in the UK and Italy around one in five related to physical threats, including terrorism and disease.<sup>27</sup>

Research has also shown that the prevalence of these narratives is not highly dependent on local realities. Donatella Bonansinga’s research into attitudes towards Islam in the Czech Republic found that Islamophobic sentiments are gathering momentum and rising quickly, although the country’s Muslim population is ‘tantamount to zero’. Bonansinga hypothesises that media representations and political rhetoric are to blame for such trends:

*The construction of otherness as referred to the Muslim culture is channelling fears about an allegedly inevitable clash of civilisations. In addition, problems concerning immigration to Europe have given birth to dramatic fears of an invasion, as these constant flows of people on the move are perceived as a challenge and threat to both national identities and security.*<sup>28</sup>

Anti-immigrant rhetoric may be the clearest example of the populist influence on contemporary political discourse in Europe, but the politics of fear, and the policies of fear, are driving wedges between many different societal and cultural groups. In particular, the divisions of nationalism and authoritarianism against liberal values are being fought in the public debates around patriotism and the ‘legitimacy’ of different voices and opinions. In this context, the ‘you’re either with us or against us’ narrative is threatening to stifle free debate, and side-lining the important contributions of ‘experts’ – now considered enemies of the state for their lack of blind national optimism. Nowhere has this become more evident than in the aftermath of the European Referendum, where even fundamental institutions, such as the Bank of England and the Supreme Court, have been politicised to the extent that major daily newspapers have ‘named and shamed’ individual judges and called for marches on the court.<sup>29</sup>

Any caution or concern expressed about the UK’s vote to leave the European Union is now branded as an act of ‘Remoaning’ by some of the nation’s most influential news outlets, and views of dissent outside the framework of acceptable commentary are labelled treacherous. This dangerous new narrative – perhaps the most explicit form of ‘othering’, with implied consequences for citizenship – is a clear obstacle to maintaining a unified society, and threatens to obscure the urgency of addressing many of the other divisions and conflicts already at play, and the inequalities of power and agency between those asserting and subscribing to the narrative itself.

## Citizens

Finally, how much of this culture of fear is reflected in changing individual identities? Are we seeing new, exclusive nationalisms at the expense of more inclusive identities and transnational solidarity?

As early as 2004, academics such as Mary Kaldor were arguing that a ‘new’ nationalism was on the rise as a direct response to globalisation.<sup>30</sup> Today many commentators believe

that the rise of right-wing populist parties is linked to global economic trends, with the core support for these parties coming from blue-collar workers whose career prospects have been damaged by competition from emerging markets, migrant labour and in some cases the austerity policies imposed by governments and EU institutions.<sup>31</sup> In their 2015 book *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas argue:

*The lack of responsiveness of established parties to the plight of the 'globalisation losers' provided a chance for their mobilisation by the new populist right... the success of the new challengers was mainly due to their appeal to the cultural anxieties of the 'losers', which, given the 'losers' heterogeneous economic interests, provided the lowest common denominator for their mobilisation.*<sup>32</sup>

This is influenced by and feeds into pessimism and a lack of social trust. Research by Demos into the attitudes of online supporters of populist movements across Europe found that these groups had very low levels of optimism about their country's future: only 10 per cent felt their country was 'on the right track'.<sup>33</sup> However, this pessimism was also evident – albeit to a lesser extent – in the wider population with only 28 per cent thinking the same across the European population as a whole. Similarly, when asked a standard question of social trust – whether 'most people can be trusted' – our online study of populist supporters found that they tended to be more fearful or sceptical of others, with 33 per cent saying yes compared with a European average of 40 per cent.

Trends in national identity and attitudes often coincide with negative sentiments towards supranational identity and institutions: Carey, for example, found a negative relationship between national pride and attitudes towards EU integration.<sup>34</sup> In the UK, there has been a clear trend towards a more exclusive sense of English national identity: in 1992, 31 per cent felt English and 62 per cent British, while in 2014, 43 per cent felt exclusively English and the same proportion British. This Englishness is related to attitudes towards the European Union, with 52 per cent of those identifying as

English supporting Leave against 32 per cent of those who felt British.

Although the UK is to some extent an outlier in this regard – regularly coming bottom of Eurobarometer surveys of European identity – attachment to the EU as an institution is low across Europe. Just 11 per cent of EU citizens feel ‘very attached’ to the EU, compared with 56 per cent who feel attached to their country and 52 per cent who feel attached to their city, town or village.<sup>35</sup> This lack of attachment, combined with a rising politics of fear and its populist manifestations, could have severe consequences for the future of the EU.

# Cross-national surveys

In 2016, we conducted cross-national surveys of citizens in France, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, Spain and Sweden, which revealed a widespread sense of precariousness, uncertainty and pessimism, which was most clearly evidenced in public opinion on political trust and the EU, and respondents' expectations for the future. In particular the polling found:

- low levels of trust in both EU and national-level governments and political institutions
- greater proportions of citizens in each country (with the exception of Spain) expecting things to get worse rather than better for their country and for Europe as a whole
- majorities (Britain, France, Sweden) or significant minorities (Germany, Poland, Spain) wanting to reduce the EU's powers or leave it all together

Opinions were more mixed when it came to questions on the impact of recent societal changes – with majorities in most countries holding favourable views on female participation in the labour market and same-sex relationships. By contrast a greater proportion of citizens in France, Germany and Poland thought that greater ethnic diversity had made their countries worse rather than better off, while the reverse was true in Britain, Spain and Sweden.

Perhaps surprisingly, our polling found significant majorities holding positive views about the impact of globalisation on Europe, their country, their local area and their own lives. The only exception here came from the French polling where half of people felt that globalisation had had a negative impact on France.

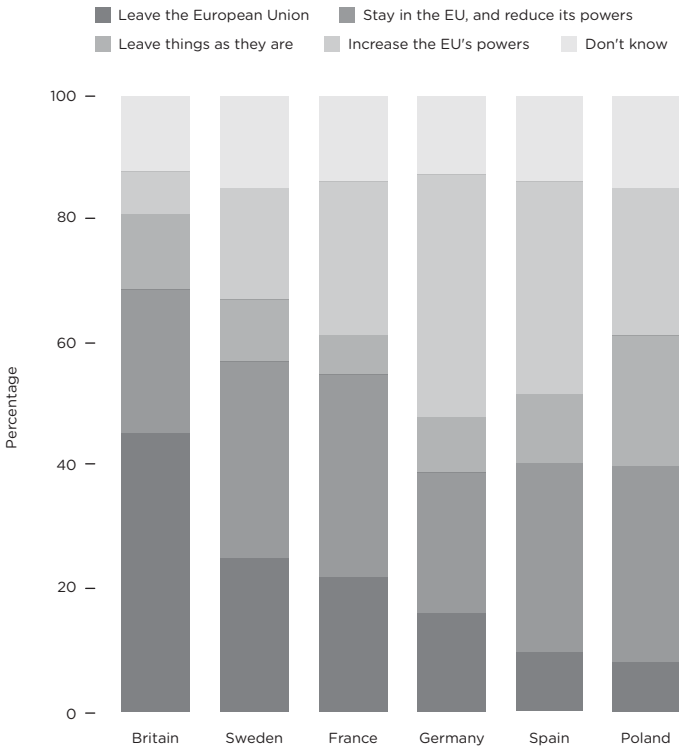
We review the findings from our cross-national polling in greater detail below.



## Euroscepticism

In every country, there is either a majority or a substantial minority in favour reducing the EU's powers or leaving it altogether. Unsurprisingly, Great Britain is the most Eurosceptic, with 45 per cent (51 per cent excluding don't knows) wanting to leave the EU. Germany is the most pro-European with half (48 per cent) wanting either to leave things as they are to increase the EU's powers, although 16 per cent expressed a desire to leave the EU (figure 1).

Figure 1 **Preferences of respondents in each country, on their country's long-term policy on the EU**



## Attitudes to globalisation

We also asked our survey respondents about globalisation. This is a difficult subject to poll because it is so multi-faceted, and means different things to different people. Rather than using the term explicitly, we described the current situation as one where:

*Over recent decades the world has become more interconnected. There is greater free trade between countries and easier communication across the globe. Money, people, cultures, jobs and industries all move more easily between countries.*

We asked respondents whether they thought this trend had had a positive or negative effect at four levels: Europe as a whole, their country, their local area, and their own lives. Overwhelmingly, and somewhat surprisingly, respondents were generally positive about globalisation across the four measures. Poland was the most positive about the effect of globalisation on Europe, with 79 per cent of respondents believing the impact had been positive. French respondents were the most sceptical, with 46 per cent saying it had been positive for Europe, 41 per cent negative, with the remaining 13 per cent answering 'don't know' (figure 2).

Most participants across all countries agreed that globalisation had had a positive impact on their local area and their own lives, again with Poland the most positive and France the more balanced, with just 42 per cent answering 'fairly' (35 per cent) or 'very' (7 per cent) positive, and 41 per cent answering 'fairly' (27 per cent) or 'very' (14 per cent) negative. While significant majorities in Britain, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden agreed that globalisation had had a positive impact on their country, French respondents disagreed, with only 39 per cent believing it had been positive and 50 per cent negative (figure 3).

Figure 2 **Percentage of respondents in each country who believe globalisation has been positive or negative for Europe as a whole**

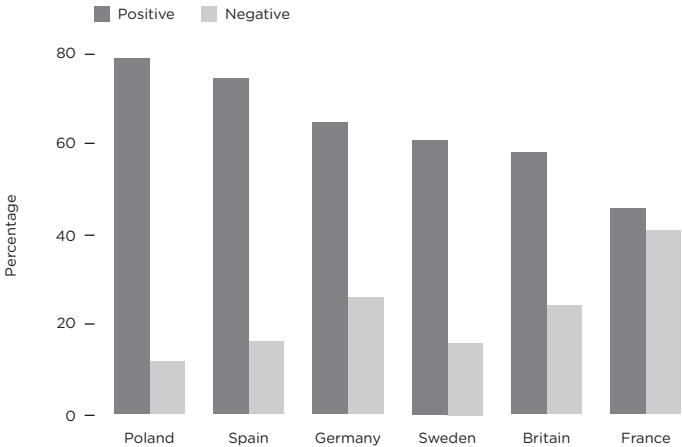
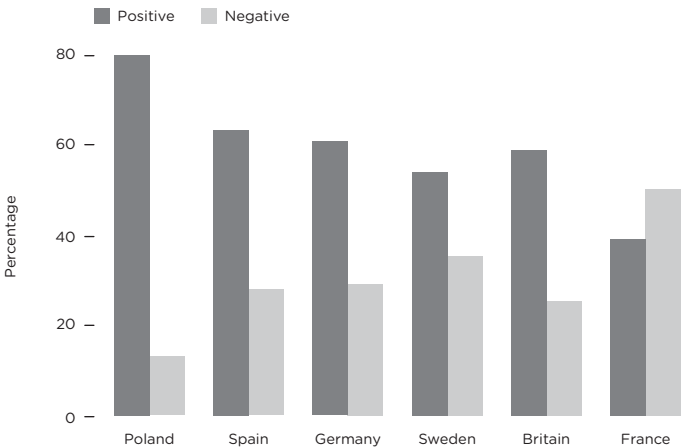


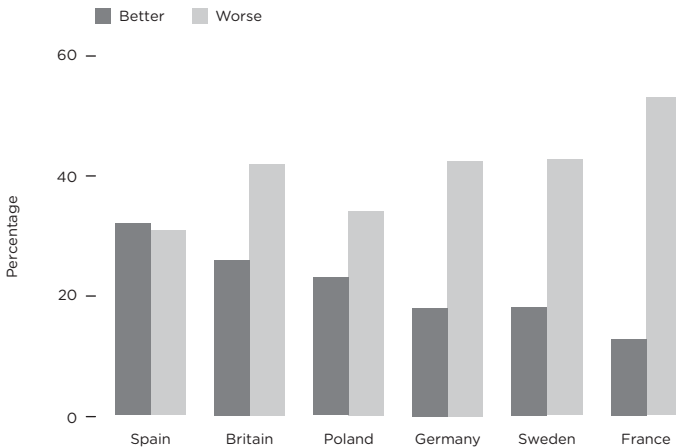
Figure 3 **Percentage of respondents in each country who believe globalisation has been positive or negative for their country**



## Pessimism

On the other hand, we found that respondents in all countries – with the consistent exception of Spain – were overwhelmingly pessimistic about prospects for the next 12 months. Large minorities or even majorities in Britain, France, Germany and Sweden thought things would get worse for Europe as a whole in the next year, while citizens in Poland and Spain felt things would get neither better nor worse. The same trend was seen when we asked about prospects for the respondent's country: pluralities in Britain, France, Germany and Sweden believe things will get worse, while those in Poland and Spain are more evenly split (figure 4).

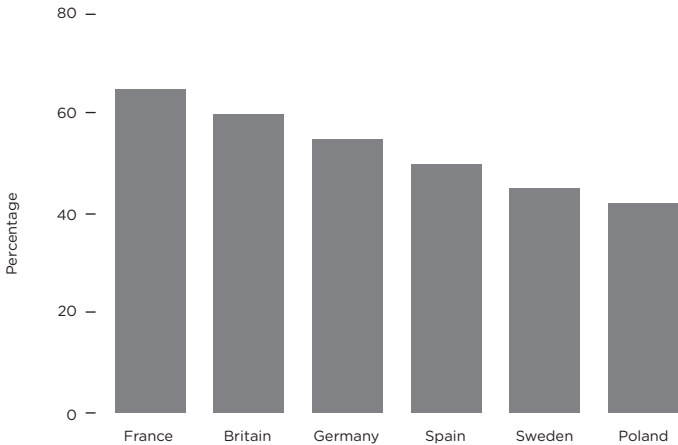
Figure 4 **Percentage of respondents in each country who think things will get better or worse for their country over the next 12 months**



## Political trust

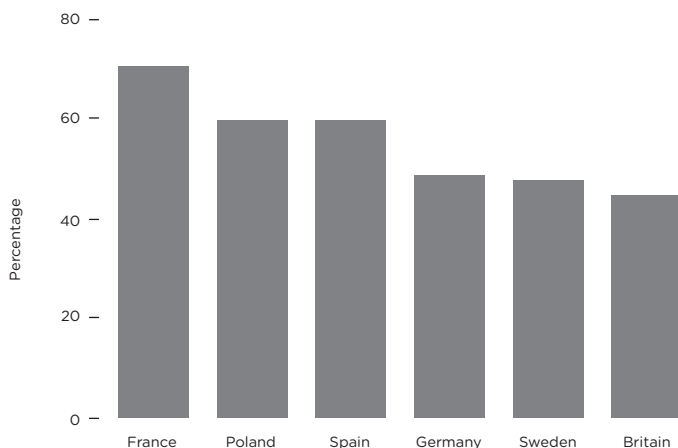
We also asked our survey respondents about their levels of trust in national and European political institutions. We found strikingly low levels of trust across all measures, and in all countries. On a scale from 0 to 10, we found that more than half of respondents in Britain, France, Germany and Spain have low levels of trust (0–4) in the European Commission. Particularly surprising is that French respondents had less trust (56 per cent 0–4) in the Commission than British respondents (51 per cent) (figure 5).

Figure 5 **Percentage of respondents reporting low levels of trust (0–4 on a 10-point scale) in the European Commission**



Conversely, while levels of trust in British political institutions were not as low (45 per cent polling 0–4 for British government, 43 per cent for parliament), French respondents had even lower trust in national institutions than EU bodies: 71 per cent of French respondents reported low levels of trust in their government, and 65 per cent for the parliament (figure 6).

Figure 6 **Percentage of respondents reporting low levels of trust (0–4 on a 10-point scale) in their national government**



## Societal changes

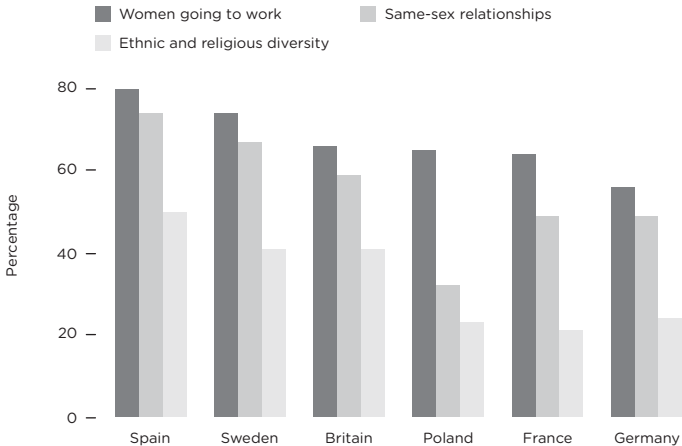
Our polling on societal changes found Spain and Sweden to be the most socially liberal countries, particularly in their support for more women going to work (80 per cent and 74 per cent) and sexual equality (74 per cent and 67 per cent). However, we also found broad support for female participation in the labour market and same-sex relationships across the other four countries (with the exception of Poland on same-sex relationships).

That said, small but not insignificant minorities of around 10 per cent in each member state think that women's economic participation has changed society for the worse, although twice as many people in Poland (13 per cent), Germany (12 per cent) and Great Britain (12 per cent) believe this than in Sweden (6 per cent). The Polish (35 per cent) and British (17 per cent) are most likely to regard the acceptance of same-sex marriage as having been a negative development.

However, it is clear that increased religious and ethnic diversity is a much more divisive issue, which gains

significantly less support in the countries we polled. Spain (50 per cent), Sweden (41 per cent) and – perhaps surprisingly – Britain (41 per cent) are the most supportive of diversity, and they are twice as likely to see a positive societal impact than in France, Germany and Poland. In these countries a higher proportion of people say that ethnic diversity has changed society for the worse than the better (eg, in France 46 per cent of people say it has changed society for the worse, compared with 21 per cent saying the reverse) (figure 7).

Figure 7 **Percentage of respondents who think that changes in relation to women in the labour market, same-sex relationships and ethnic and religious diversity have ‘improved society for the better’**



## European case studies

Our six country case studies provide a deeper understanding of the drivers and symptoms of the politics of fear through a detailed analysis of national specificities. Each provides a different analytical perspective and takes a different methodological approach, taking account of national contexts and trends.

In France, we find a toxic political atmosphere, dominated by negative voting intentions, and a population divided between a majority that continues to view the Front National in strongly negative terms, set against a sizeable minority that see its leader Marine le Pen as ‘strong’ and a ‘realist’. This political context is underpinned by a more widespread sense of anxiety and crisis, linked to recent attacks, and economic uncertainty.

In Germany, by contrast, citizens’ concerns are shown to be more closely tied to specific issues around the EU’s impact in key areas of policy, including social security and EU payments. The findings here reveal there is a significant gap between the views of the public and those of German politicians, who tend not to recognise these concrete concerns and instead speak of a generalised sense of fear among their citizens.

In Poland, while socioeconomic grievances have played a role in the electoral success of the Law and Justice party, their rise to power also reflects a clear backlash against liberal and European values. The Polish case study argues that the dissemination of systematic political lies and conspiracy theory through social and alternative media has been a key component of the populist right’s success.

In the UK we find similar social and cultural underpinnings to the Brexit vote, although these are shown to be heavily intertwined with economic and educational inequalities. Social networks are also found to be significant



– internationally and intranationally – with those people who have recently socialised with someone from either a different country or a different UK city more likely to have voted Remain.

Even in the home of social democratic liberalism, Sweden, our findings show a similar (if slighter) turn towards ethnically defined conceptions of national identity in Swedish political discourse. That said, the public polling also reflects the continued strength of civic understandings of identity in Sweden, albeit with Sweden Democrats voters more likely to hold a mixture of civic and ethnic conceptions.

Spain stands as an outlier, with no significant right-wing populist gains despite seemingly fertile conditions – having been particularly impacted by the economic crisis and with high levels of immigration. The Spanish research – ‘the Spanish exception’ – suggests that this unique situation is linked to Spain’s political past, its current electoral system, and the failure of its far-right parties to modernise. However, polling findings from Spain on support for reduced immigration present a warning against complacency even in this country.

The following chapters explore these case studies in detail, and the findings of surveys and interviews conducted in each country with both citizens and elites during the second half of 2016.

In-depth analysis of each of these case studies can be found in the full report, *Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself*.

# Responding to the politics of fear: principles for good leadership, government and policy-making

This project has identified a wide range of fears and insecurities plaguing European member states and the continent as a whole – some of which are rooted in specific, practical circumstances and others which more reflect a particular mood, whether a sense of personal precariousness or national malaise. To restore the solidarity, optimism and support for liberalism essential to underpinning peace, security and openness in Europe, it is clear that citizens' fears, whether based in economic 'realities' or social and cultural 'feelings', must be taken seriously by political representatives at all levels – but responding to them, and rebuilding trust, will necessitate effective public policy initiatives and strong political leadership.

Below we set out some of the core principles of leadership, governance and public policy-making that could support such renewal at EU and national levels, with the support of civil society and other non-governmental institutions (NGOs).

## **Promote safety and security**

Citizens across Europe are pessimistic and anxious about the future, and a significant minority of people feel 'left behind' by the current system. National and EU-level governments need to promote policies and political discourses that seek to allay fears, address concrete concerns and more proactively foster social cohesion. This requires moral and principled

leadership on the part of political leaders, and targeted policy interventions to address the economic, social and cultural factors driving insecurity and dislocation.

Our cross-national polling confirmed there is a widespread sense of pessimism, precariousness and anxiety across our case study countries. Some of these concerns relate to the economy and national security, which have continued to simmer or gain force since the financial crisis and the recent escalation of terror incidents, but others pertain more to feelings of social and cultural loss. It is clear that these two dimensions are becoming increasingly intertwined, together fuelling personal anxieties and a feeling that political leaders and institutions are no longer able to offer control and security to citizens.

Within each nation, our findings show that while feelings of insecurity and instability may be widespread, they are felt more strongly by certain groups – those with more conservative social values, and with lower income and education levels. Our research has therefore provided empirical evidence to support the concept of the ‘left behinds’, both economically and culturally defined. It seems that across most of our case study countries there is a significant minority of the population (10–20 per cent) who are deeply pessimistic about the future and feel out of step with contemporary societal values.

In responding to the current febrile atmosphere political leaders should consider the approaches discussed below.

**Provide genuine moral leadership, to act as a stabilising and guiding hand in response to public anxiety and fear**

The Realpolitik motivations for referendums in the UK and Italy have spectacularly backfired on their proponents, and only served to heighten civic anxiety and division. Furthermore, governments’ ‘adoptive’ strategy in responding to populist rhetoric has led mainstream parties, particularly in the UK and France, to foster a negative and divisive political discourse around issues such as immigration and EU integration.<sup>36</sup> This tendency was most starkly reflected in our French polling, which found that twice as many people

expected their vote to be driven by negative motivations (to prevent a candidate they disapprove of winning) than positive ones (choosing the best candidate) in the upcoming national elections.

Angela Merkel's chancellorship presents an alternative approach, marked by a steadfast commitment to her refugee policy and an assertion that 'fear cannot be a counsel for political action'.<sup>37</sup> While Merkel's approval ratings have fluctuated, they still remain far ahead of her European counterparts.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the 2016 Christmas terror attack in Berlin represents a significant challenge to Merkel's policies and approach, but again she has remained unwavering in her calls for national unity, based around values of openness, freedom and humanity.<sup>39</sup>

While politicians must recognise that the recent populist uprisings reflect genuine concerns about the direction of travel in their country and the broader world that must be addressed, this should not come at the expense of principled, stable leadership that seeks to build long-term social and economic growth and enrichment. Politicians may feel they are representing the views of their people by bowing to populist rhetoric in the short term, but the fact remains that citizens also fundamentally expect higher moral leadership from their politicians than from almost any other profession.<sup>40</sup> Political leaders should therefore seek to promote more positive and hopeful visions of the future, which can act as a cohesive force to build national unity.

### **Deliver targeted policy interventions**

These policy interventions should address the concerns of 'left behind' or vulnerable groups, and more proactively promote social and community cohesion. The policy response to the politics of fear must include initiatives that attempt to tackle economic insecurity and inequality directly – through inclusive growth strategies, education and skills investment, and regulatory interventions to reduce the precariousness of low-skilled work. However, there is also a need for a more proactive approach to address some of the cultural drivers of the politics of fear – especially, as reflected in our polling, the

perception that immigration has not been matched by social integration, and that cultural pluralism is threatening long-established, deep-rooted aspects of national identity.

For example, the recent Casey Review in the UK has shone light on the UK government's piecemeal approach to promoting social cohesion, and has called for greater government investment in English language support, social mixing initiatives and the emancipation of women in conservative religious communities.<sup>41</sup> Without addressing areas of clear failure in integration policy, the positive arguments for immigration, whether based on moral values or interests, will remain subordinate to feelings of cultural infringement among large minorities of citizens.

Examples of more proactive approaches to promoting cohesion in our case study countries often come from civil society initiatives. This includes Sweden's ÖppnaDörren, which aims to help and encourage newcomers and more established Swedes to build connections and friendships, through dinners, monthly meetings and opportunities to build professional networks. Another approach, pioneered in the German city of Mannheim, is community dialogue – a forum for different sections of a diverse community to come together in facilitated discussion to establish common concerns and priorities for the city.

National and local governments can play a role in supporting and scaling effective civil society programmes, as well as facilitating better cross-sector working. This is the approach taken in the Polish city of Bialystok, which in response to a spike in hate crime launched a multi-agency initiative to tackle racism and xenophobia in the city, including special training for municipal police officers, and developed an online platform run by civil society groups to report racist or xenophobic graffiti.

### **Support a more focused EU**

There should be support for a more focused EU, which can achieve tangible successes in areas crucial to underpinning the sense of economic and physical security that encourages citizens to favour openness over nationalism.

There was widespread consensus in our consultations with national and civil society practitioners that the EU should concentrate on a stronger, more core remit of responsibilities – enabling it to deliver more comprehensively on a reduced number of areas, and avoiding the ‘over-reach’ that contributes to a sense of disenfranchisement among citizens. Ultimately, the more the EU can be seen to achieve successes in ‘big ticket’ policy areas outside social and cultural frameworks – which our research shows is viewed as the preserve of national governments by most of the public – the more it will help foster the sense of security essential to promoting togetherness over division.

These responsibilities will include levers that emphasise cooperation and solidarity – but to productive and tangible ends, such as on security, counter-terror and immigration policy. The most recent Eurobarometer (86) lends support to this view, finding substantial majorities in favour of current EU policy priorities around freedom of movement, common defence and security policy, and common energy policy.<sup>42</sup>

EU leaders can also play a role in promoting safety and security by re-orientating policy to position the EU not simply as an architect of globalisation, but as a protector against the global economy’s destabilising effects at local levels. Importantly, the EU has the opportunity to promote just, as well as free, trade. Major trade deals such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) have been perceived to favour corporate interests at the expense of public scrutiny and protection, leading the EU’s Commissioner for Trade, Cecilia Malmström, to declare that the EU must ‘do more to engage people at national level and to find a new European consensus on trade’.<sup>43</sup> This involves securing trade deals that explicitly protect workers’ rights and enable national governments to hold big business to account.

## **Reconnect ‘political elites’ and citizens**

Political leaders need to address a crisis in political trust through measures that reinforce and rejuvenate representative

democracy and political accountability. The recent increase in the use of referendums across Europe demonstrates a failure of effective representation, with many serving only to inflame, rather than settle, divisive issues.<sup>44</sup> There is therefore a pressing need for new mechanisms which enable politicians to understand the concerns of citizens more constructively, and provide clear lines of accountability to political decision-making.

Our findings point to a crisis in political trust. For some countries, trust in national governments is higher than trust in the EU (particularly the UK), while for others the reverse is true (particularly Poland and Spain) – however, trust is chronically low throughout. The German case study, in particular, revealed a significant disconnect between public opinion – rooted in concrete concerns about the EU’s influence on national contexts – and the views of many German politicians – diagnosing the problem as a diffuse and nebulous sense of fear. There is therefore an urgent need to address this disconnect between politicians and citizens, and the low trust environment that is both its cause and symptom.

Participatory or deliberative forms of democracy can be seen as a possible silver bullet for tackling a lack of faith in the political system. And there are notable examples of well-structured deliberative approaches that have been successful at engaging citizens and generating informed debate and public contribution (eg, the Irish Convention on the Constitution and Iceland’s Constitutional Council).<sup>45</sup> However, attempts at deliberation at the EU level have largely been ineffective – with only three campaigns under the EU’s flagship European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) managing to fulfil requirements to be heard by the Commission (1 million signatures, from seven countries, relating to an issue within the EU’s competencies).<sup>46</sup>

At the national level, calls for greater democratic participation have largely been met through a rise in the number of referendums, which have had destabilising effects on national democracies and have contributed to what Belgian author David Van Reybrouck calls ‘democratic

fatigue syndrome', with more intensive electoral politics actually serving to undermine trust and engagement.<sup>47</sup>

In restoring trust, while direct and participatory approaches can provide an important supplement to existing democratic processes, there is a need to get the fundamentals – of democratic accountability and representation – right first. This impetus can be supported in the following ways.

### **Reduce the remoteness of 'political elites'**

In order to make political elites less remote it is necessary to create more effective mechanisms for dialogue between politicians and citizens, and initiatives to make parliaments more reflective of the wider population. There is a pressing need to reduce the considerable (and seemingly rising) social and geographic gap between politicians and citizens. Part of the answer must involve bringing politics down to a local level. This could be done through developing forums and instruments to enable greater dialogue between national politicians and their local communities. There is a clear role for civil society organisations to act as a bridge between local communities and local, national and supranational politics. Maison d'Europe is an example of an initiative in France that works to connect local communities to EU-level politics through conferences, which provide a forum to connect people to EU institutions and politicians. The membership arms of political parties can also be influential in embedding politics, and even policy development, at a local level.

Making parliaments more reflective of the wider population in gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background is also central to reducing the remoteness of politics from people's lives. On gender, for example, despite some gains in recent elections women are still in a minority in lower or single parliamentary houses in all our case study countries, ranging from 43.6 per cent in Sweden to just 26.2 per cent in France.<sup>48</sup> More effort needs to be made on both the demand side (recruiting politicians from diverse backgrounds) and supply side (providing leadership opportunities for under-represented groups).



Civil society organisations can play a role here also. In the UK, for example, a programme called Reclaim (based in Manchester) aims to encourage community and political leaders from working-class backgrounds by supporting young people from deprived communities to deliver a social change project over two years in their community.<sup>49</sup>

**Support democratic and policy-making processes that build rather than undermine trust**

Referendums should be used sparingly and implemented better when needed; the policy-making process should be more transparent and open to external input. They are an appropriate democratic instrument in specific circumstances – particularly, where there has been a significant shift in public opinion, which requires the public to ratify a related change in policy direction collectively (eg, the 2015 Irish referendum on same-sex marriage, which passed with 62 per cent of the vote). However, recently referendums have been more often used as a political tool to resolve internal political conflicts (within the Conservative party in the UK) or external political conflicts (between the Hungarian government and the EU over refugees).

This motivation undermines representative democracy, with governments abdicating decision-making to settle their own political disputes. If a referendum is required, there needs to be a fundamental reassessment of how they are structured and delivered – to ensure that people are better informed and engaged, and campaigns are seen to be factually sound.

There *is* scope for resolving specific political issues through well-thought-through deliberative mechanisms as an alternative to referendums, ranging from light-touch approaches that involve large numbers of people, to more intensive processes, including sortition-based citizens' councils. Digital technology has the potential to widen the reach of these initiatives dramatically. For example, since 2014 Paris has been experimenting with a crowd-sourcing approach to participatory budgeting, through which residents are provided with online and face-to-face forums to submit, and vote on, ideas for how to spend a budget of €426 million

between 2014 and 2020 (5 per cent of the city's investment budget).<sup>50</sup> In the 2016 spending round nearly 160,000 Parisians voted on how to allocate that year's budget of €100 million, an increase in participation of 40 per cent on the previous year.<sup>51</sup> The Paris example demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of deliberative approaches – while it has been able to engage large numbers of people, those involved are still only a fraction of the 2.2 million population of Paris. Although deliberative initiatives can be deployed effectively to build trust and engagement on specific issues, or to foster more structured debate around the traditional electoral process, they still lack the representative legitimacy of electoral democracy.

Furthermore, policy-making itself needs to become a tool for engendering trust rather than an opaque or technocratic process conducted in conversations between politicians and civil servants behind closed doors. For example, the UK government has committed to making 'open policy-making' the norm under its Civil Service Reform Plan – though the results so far have been limited to small innovations applied to narrow areas of policy.<sup>52</sup>

True open policy-making requires far more transparency over the policy design process – setting out overall aims and the options for change, and encouraging a truly consultative process that gathers expertise and input more widely. This should apply across all levels of government – from local community and neighbourhood plans, to national policy conversations, to greater transparency and openness within the EU legislature.

### **Boost the accountability of EU institutions and policy-makers at EU level**

The accountability of EU institutions and policy-makers can be improved by making information on the legislative and decision-making process more readily available, making more active efforts to disseminate this information, supporting public engagement, and ensuring that the nuances of national debates are better represented at the supranational level. As a result of the actual and perceived distance between EU

legislators and citizens, transparency is often seen as a panacea to problems of low public trust and legitimacy.<sup>53</sup> A particular area of concern in this regard is the consolidation of decision-making power within the Council of Ministers, which prioritises behind-closed-doors negotiations between representatives of national governments. The lack of transparency at the Council level threatens the EU's accountability – with limited indication of decision-making responsibilities, and its representativeness failing to reflect the diversity of voices and positions within national political discourses.

Increasing the transparency of Council negotiations is therefore a much-needed step to supporting broader improvements in accountability across EU institutions. The European Ombudsman has recently made recommendations for greater transparency in EU triilogue negotiations – where representatives of the Council and Parliament (with assistance from the Commission) meet to discuss legislative changes – which include proposals to publish meeting dates, summary agendas, positions statements and the names of decision-makers.<sup>54</sup> These recommendations could be applied more broadly to Council negotiations and would provide a means of significantly increasing publicly available information on decision-making within this forum.

However, this form of transparency – increasing the amount of publicly available information, which is the dominant understanding of transparency at the EU level – only goes so far in securing meaningful accountability. In a study of transparency within the Council since 1999, academics Jørgen Bølstad and James Cross argue that while the amount of public information has increased:

*This does not necessarily translate into a broader public engagement with EU politics and increased understanding of how the EU makes decisions. For non-experts, the decision-making process remains byzantine, and the provision of access to legislative records has done little to ameliorate this fact.<sup>55</sup>*

Transparency therefore needs to be conceptualised in less of a corporate and more of a civic manner – beginning with the public provision of information, but followed by far more proactive attempts to disseminate this information in a way that draws clear lines of accountability and actively engages the public.

As well as increasing accountability, to address EU shortcomings in legitimacy and trust it is also necessary to make stronger efforts to boost the representativeness of EU institutions. Increasing transparency at the Council level would have no significant impact on this as it fails to deal with a more fundamental issue – put forward by constitutional academic Vernon Bogdanor – that European elections ‘do not determine or even substantially influence the development of the Union... they do not determine the political colour of the Union, how it is to be governed, for they do not affect the composition of the Commission, nor, of course, of the Council of Ministers’.<sup>56</sup>

Part of the answer lies in ensuring the full implementation of the so-called ‘Interinstitutional agreement on better law-making’ introduced in 2016, which sets out the principle of ‘equal footing’ of Parliament and the Council.<sup>57</sup> Beyond this, citizens need to be given more confidence that their vote genuinely influences the EU’s policy-making agenda, through strengthening the powers and visibility of the European Parliament (and its MEPs) in developing policy and delivering outcomes at the EU level.

### **Make the case for openness and liberalism**

With illiberal, nationalist political discourse ascendant, there is an urgent need to put forward a more persuasive case for liberalism – one that promotes liberal values of openness, international cooperation, pluralism and respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, but in a way that is more meaningful for ordinary people.

Pro-liberal politicians and institutions must become far more proactive and adept at building coalitions around collective interests (which cut across traditional political

divides), engaging in – and helping to shape – national debates around identity and immigration, and ensuring that the benefits of international openness are experienced more widely across society.

Our findings indicate that while Europe is not experiencing an absolute rejection of liberal values – with majorities in most countries holding liberal attitudes towards issues such as same-sex relationships and female participation in the labour market – there has been a slide towards more authoritarian and socially conservative views, particularly around ethnicity and immigration. In France, Germany and Poland, in particular, a higher proportion of people feel that greater ethnic and religious diversity has had a negative effect on their country rather than been a positive influence. And even traditionally liberal Spain and Sweden have seen a hardening of opinion on immigration. There is a sense, then, that anti-liberal rhetoric is cutting through to public opinion far more effectively and reopening debates previously thought settled.

So, why have liberal arguments failed to effectively speak to people?

First, and particularly, at the EU level, there has been an over-emphasis on explaining the functions and structures of the political process and institutions (so-called ‘input legitimacy’) at the expense of genuine citizen engagement. This has been ineffective at two levels – in genuinely informing people about the EU (public awareness about EU institutions and competencies remains low) and in promoting any kind of pro-EU, pro-cooperation consensus. The 2015 Eurobarometer (83), for example, found that there was no correlation between people’s level of knowledge about the EU and pro-EU sentiment.<sup>58</sup>

Second, where liberals at national and EU levels have focused more on promoting values, these have too often been discussed in an abstract form, or in ways that presuppose their universality and ubiquity. Both the content and source of these arguments are important. As American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has argued, the ‘new cosmopolitan elite... acts and talks in ways that insult, alienate, and energize many of

their fellow citizens, particularly those who have a psychological predisposition to authoritarianism'.<sup>59</sup>

There is therefore a need to reframe and re-energise the case for liberalism and openness, and there are a number of clear steps that can be taken to achieve this, which are discussed below.

### **Develop pro-liberal arguments around collective interests**

It is necessary to develop pro-liberal arguments around collective interests – issues that matter to ordinary people and that cut across traditional party political lines – and demonstrate the concrete benefits of these positions. By focusing on *interests*, liberal arguments can move beyond the abstract and the technocratic, and begin to make a compelling case for the concrete benefits of international openness, pluralism and diversity to ordinary people's lives ('output legitimacy'). Crucially, they can reach out to people who may not be self-identifying 'liberals', but who ultimately share common concerns and hopes for their families, communities and country's place in the world. This requires liberals to be proactive in reaching across traditional political divides, to create coalitions over shared interests – even if the motivation behind the interest or its policy manifestation may be complementary rather than matched.

Areas for possible coalition-building include immigration policy, where social liberals could feasibly reach out to business and free marketers to resist more nationalistic, protectionist reforms to immigration policy. Liberals could even attempt to capitalise on new political space created by populist insurgents where their interests or aims align. This is particularly the case with the social interventionist, big government elements of current populist discourse – so evident in both Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen's anti-free-trade protectionism – which liberals should engage with to develop a broad consensus in support of improved social protection and more humane welfare policy.

### **Practise values of openness and pluralism**

Pro-liberal politicians and institutions should put values of

openness and pluralism into practice by supporting initiatives that enable positive, and ultimately consensus-building, debates on issues such as identity, nationalism and immigration. There has often been a temptation for liberals to actively dismiss or more passively avoid debates on potentially divisive issues linked to national identity, but this approach risks leaving the argument to be framed, uncontested, by the populist right. The narrowness of the Remain campaign's message during the UK Referendum, framed predominantly in economic terms, points to the potential consequences of failing to shape the wider debate.<sup>60</sup> There are warning signs that similar mistakes are being made in countries where there has not yet been a populist upsurge – particularly Spain, where our polling found that 40 per cent of people would vote for a party pledging to reduce immigration. This, more than any other issue, has also been 'under-discussed' in many Western nations, which can eventually fuel the rise of parties willing to challenge normative viewpoints.

Liberals therefore need to take an active role in shaping the boundaries and content of these discussions – which will require a careful balance to be struck between contesting discriminatory rhetoric and ensuring that a defence of identity politics does not stifle free and open debate.

Framing the public conversation is a crucial aspect of political leadership, and must be conducted in good faith and with legitimacy. In 2010, the French government under President Nicholas Sarkozy launched a national debate on French identity, involving over one hundred local town hall meetings across France. However, they were seen as a political tool to bolster support from the right in the run-up to regional elections. Rather than building consensus, the framing of the debates fanned the flames of nationalism and xenophobia – by emphasising divisive issues like the burqa. Despite initial public support for the initiative, by their conclusion, only 33 per cent of those polled considered them to be constructive and 61 per cent said the process had in no way defined what being French means.<sup>61</sup>

An alternative approach would be to frame debates more actively around points of commonality than points of

difference, as argued by Karen Stenner, author of *The Authoritarian Dynamic*:

*It would seem that we can best limit intolerance of difference by parading, talking about, and applauding our sameness... Ultimately, nothing inspires greater tolerance from the intolerant than an abundance of common and unifying beliefs, practices, rituals, institutions, and processes.*<sup>62</sup>

There is also a need for greater inclusivity in debates around European values, providing space for more socially conservative voices: not watering down liberal positions, but preventing the exclusion of those who may be susceptible to right-wing populist rhetoric.

A potentially instructive example can be found in the Commission's rejection of the 'One of Us' campaign in 2014 – one of the few initiatives of the ECI actually to gain the required number of signatures. This initiative, which garnered 1.8 million signatures, predominantly from Italy and Germany (and backed by the Catholic church), called on the EU to 'ban and end the financing of activities which presuppose the destruction of human embryos'. While few liberals would question the Commission's ultimate decision in this case, there was clearly a need to provide an outlet to continue the debate and better engage with those who felt strongly on this issue to explain in concrete (rather than abstract liberal) terms why the Commission rejected the initiative. The flat dismissal may simply have left those backing the campaign with the sense that the EU is not for them.

### **Ensure that the benefits of openness and diversity are experienced more widely**

The benefits of openness and diversity must be experienced more widely, particularly through supporting greater intra- and international mobility and engagement for socioeconomic groups unlikely to participate in existing initiatives. Our findings, particularly from the UK case study – which found that the size of people's social networks significantly influences their attitudes towards liberalism,



international cooperation and cultural diversity – point to the need to ensure that people from groups with low socioeconomic status, education levels and mobility and/or from rural areas are given the same opportunities to travel and mix with people from different backgrounds as has become the norm among more affluent, cosmopolitan groups.

At the EU level, while policies like the Erasmus programme and data roaming are popular initiatives, they often only serve a narrow tranche of the European population: those who are already mobile and internationalist in outlook. More needs to be done, then, to support mixing between communities that are not currently served by these kinds of policies. The current Erasmus programme (Erasmus+) was originally titled Erasmus for All, with the intention of opening up the programme to volunteering, vocational and work-related placements, as well as higher education and graduate schemes. The EU should invest more heavily in widening this programme to be more inclusive to those outside the university system, and reach out to schools, vocational learning institutions and community organisations to help them to provide resources and support to facilitate the application process.

The UK case study's finding on social networks also demonstrates that mobility schemes *within nations* could be significant to fostering more liberal attitudes and potentially overcoming divisions wrought by hard-wired social perspectives and economic experiences. Currently, many governments only focus on integration policy from a racial perspective, but improving socioeconomic and rural–metropolitan integration will be just as important to building more cohesive societies.

Civil society organisations have a potential role to play here in facilitating mixing at a national and community level. For example, the Carnegie UK Trust has recently launched its Twin Towns programme, which will provide financial support and expertise to enable ten small and medium-sized towns to trial bilateral 'twinning' arrangements over an 18-month period.<sup>63</sup> So too could education systems and local councils place a stronger emphasis on building partnerships between

schools of differing circumstances – whether within communities or in different towns and cities – to expose children to a greater diversity of experience.

For adults, there is scope to consider schemes that encourage mixing for non-graduate working-age citizens – whether through paid voluntary international work placement schemes for individuals and their families in non-professional sectors, or by linking tax relief to community and civic participation. Government-administered community grants could also be structured to encourage support for projects that bring diverse groups together to share common experiences.

## **Counter post-truth narratives in politics and the media**

Systematic manipulation of facts for political ends and the growing acceptance of conspiracy theories are emergent trends of particular concern, in part accelerated by new forms of social and alternative media.

According to Oxford Dictionaries, ‘post-truth’ was the word of 2016, fuelled by political campaigns in the USA and the UK that have had a notably loose relationship with the ‘facts’. Aided by social and alternative media, political misinformation has become a systematic tool used to bolster populist campaigns.

The Polish case study presents the starkest evidence of this, describing how the Law and Justice party successfully campaigned on a narrative of ‘Poland in ruin’, despite rising living standards and falling inequality over the last decade. Our polling also found that Islamic terrorism had risen to the top of Poles’ concerns for their country, although there have been no reported terrorist attacks in Poland and the country has only a small Muslim population – a clear indication of the impact of Islamophobic campaigning from the populist right.

Where there is a sense that information or activities are being obfuscated, or that politicians are not acting in citizens’ interests, people will necessarily reduce their trust in formal institutions; the danger now is that we have entered an

information age, which privileges informal movements and provides the opportunity to construct echo chambers around preferred viewpoints.

Countering these false narratives and conspiracy theories will require decisive action from political representatives – addressing the issues that encourage susceptibility to their messages and rebuilding trust in their expertise, and the systems that support stable, democratic government.

Citizens must also be supported to differentiate between credible and non-credible news sources, by promoting media literacy and digital citizenship – whether through national education systems or more informal methods.

Pilot schemes designed and trialled by Demos have demonstrated promising achievements in preventing the online radicalisation of school students, equipping young people with the critical-thinking skills and media awareness to be able to evaluate the arguments and content presented by extremists. These pilots found statistically significant impacts on young people's confidence in differentiating between truth and lies on social media,<sup>64</sup> and could readily be applied to wider digital media literacy training to improve the public's skills in critically assessing day-to-day political information.

Government-led initiatives in challenging post-truth politics will necessarily also need to be complemented by those facilitated by civil society and grassroots organisations, whose position outside the establishment may help afford them greater legitimacy in the short term. We must be clear that not all civil society organisations represent a benevolent force when it comes to combatting populist misinformation – with the populist movement in Poland, for instance, backed by a range of far-right or anti-liberal civic groups. Moreover, civil society organisations, particularly international NGOs, can be regarded as being part of 'the establishment' or serving 'foreign interests', and hence can lack widespread agency. However, certain civil society voices, enjoying high levels of trust among the public, may have greater scope in contesting false narratives than mainstream political institutions.

A number of civil society organisations have emerged in recent years with a mission to promote greater ‘truthfulness’ in public discourse. According to a report for the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford, some 60 per cent of fact-checking outlets in Europe are ‘operating either as independent ventures or as projects of a civil society organisation’<sup>65</sup> – including FullFact in the UK and Demagog in Poland. As well as targeting and challenging misinformation a number of civil society initiatives have been established that foster more evidence-based public debates. Mediendienst-Integration, based in Germany, is one such organisation, aiming to support accurate reporting of immigration-related news in the mainstream media. By providing information, resources and expert contributors for journalists, the organisation seeks to shift coverage ‘from portraying “perceived truths” to [reporting] on empirical facts’.<sup>66</sup>

While these organisations can play an important role in shaping media and political narratives, they too can suffer from a lack of democratic accountability and popular legitimacy. Other initiatives are therefore attempting to take a more grassroots approach by building civil society’s resilience to ‘post-truth’ narratives and politics. One such organisation is the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD), which has been able to mobilise 1.5 million Poles (5 per cent of the population) in protests against the manipulation of state institutions by the Polish government.<sup>67</sup> As well as building a civic resistance to the current Polish government, KOD takes an overtly pro-European, pro-liberal stance, and is working to build a civic movement around these values and principles.

The EU has a potentially powerful role to play in supporting the incubation and scaling of these bottom-up organisations. As well as providing funding for these groups, the EU can provide capacity-building, coordination and networking support to ensure their longer-term sustainability. EU support clearly carries some risks in relation to grassroots authenticity and legitimacy. Ensuring transparency in funding and support criteria and allocation is therefore vital to refute claims of clandestine interference by the EU.

## Conclusions

This project has presented a snapshot of the ‘mood on the ground’ in six member states of Europe, during a period of increasing social and cultural crisis and political upheaval. Through a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods – including surveys, interviews, focus groups and workshops – it has drilled beneath the surface of Europe’s ‘hidden crisis’, as it has become increasingly laid bare for all to see. It has allowed us to explore the nuances of how fear manifests in particular national contexts, and how cultural identities, histories and economic conditions intersect to foster conditions that support the rise of authoritarian, nationalist, populist or illiberal forces. Importantly, it has also captured the hard-wired social attitudes and mindsets that are being increasingly activated by populist parties and campaigns, to react against a period of unprecedented global connectivity and digital transformation.

The picture painted by the research is certainly cause for concern for those who would like to see Europe, and a post-Brexit UK, remain both cohesive within and open to the world. Nonetheless, as we have outlined above, there are clear pathways forward for those leaders with ambitions to restore and enhance the stability and success of the EU, and to promote stable, liberal democracies. Each principle will strengthen the next, and they must be undertaken with a spirit of urgency, inclusivity and vigour.

Attention should focus on how elites can restore trust in the fundamental institutions of our democracies, better articulate the myriad, shared benefits and strength of open societies, and encourage more diverse, challenging and free public debate on issues important to people’s social and cultural identity. Fundamentally, however, political parties and institutions must consider what practical role they can play in helping more citizens to feel safe in their

lives – whether through public policy levers or simply through more inclusive, emotionally attuned and morally responsible leadership.

There is no doubt that we are living through a transition that feels cataclysmic in nature – disruptive, challenging and potentially dangerous. But the question as to whether this is the beginning or the end of something has not yet been decided. It is important that European governments, and the EU itself, do not succumb to reactive policy-making and short-term thinking to try to ‘stem the tide’ of populism, nationalism and authoritarianism. Liberals may feel in a position of disadvantage, but as this research shows, there is still a fundamental, majority baseline of support for many liberal ideas and policies, which can surely be reactivated in the future. The road ahead will be hard, but with humility, conviction, creative energy, collaboration and perseverance, new shoots will grow.

# Notes

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There is a spectre haunting Europe: a culture and politics of fear, which asserts its growing influence in myriad ways. Most visibly, in the rise of far-right populist movements, the collapse of the social contract between citizens and political institutions, and in the proliferation of authoritarian and exclusionary rhetoric.

This pan-European project has sought to capture a snapshot of the ways in which fear is manifesting in the social and political climate of six different member states: the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Poland and Sweden.

Demos partnered with organisations in each of these countries to undertake research on the ground, offering of-the-moment insights into trends both common across the region, and also distinct to member states and their specific historical and political circumstances.

From this, Demos sets out a series of principles of leadership and governance to respond to this new age of anxiety – restoring strength and openness to Europe's democracies.

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