

Is this the end of the populist surge?

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Following the UK's Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election as U.S. President, 2017 was billed as a year in which mainstream parties in the Netherlands, France and Germany could be overtaken by populist challengers in the shape of Geert Wilders' PVV, Marine Le Pen's Front National, and the AfD in Germany. **Abel Bojar** asks whether the PVV's failure in the Netherlands and Macron's victory in France signals the end of this populist trend.



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As sighs of relief are heaved across the European establishment upon Emmanuel Macron's decisive victory over Marine Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential election, a wider question that arises is whether his victory can be seen as a lynchpin in a broader story. In other words, has the populist moment that European observers were so ready to proclaim in the wake of the EU's migration crisis, the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's surprise victory across the Atlantic, come to an abrupt halt?

Clearly, less than a year after the tumultuous events of 2015-16, it is too early to provide a definitive answer. Some signs, however, do point in a cheerful direction as far as Western and Southern Europe are concerned. Long seen as the most likely candidate to carry forward the populist tide, Geert Wilders' PVV disappointed its supporters in March by coming a distant second behind its centre-right rival, the VVD.

Likewise, much has been said about Norbert Hofer's narrow defeat in Austria's recent presidential election last December. His party, one of the strongest of its kind in Europe, also seems to be experiencing a slight setback in most recent polls: while still the most popular party in the country by polling around 30%, it has slid about 5% since the beginning of the year and the incumbent centre-left SPÖ appears to be narrowing the gap. Other examples include the collapse in support for the Finns Party since last September and the more recent weakening of the

German AfD, UKIP and if, for the sake of balance, one includes parties from the far-left of the spectrum, Syriza in Greece.

One can only speculate about the causes of this trend reversal if it amounts to one at all. According to the economic story, the Eurozone's tepid recovery appears to be holding up, possibly ameliorating some of the economic grievances that led to the populist vote in the first place. Alternatively, the answer could lie in mainstream actors' strategic (opportunistic?) positioning: by taking on board some of the far-right's core messages in the domains of security and immigration, they have managed to appeal to some of their potential supporters. Though not so much in the French campaign, this sort of dynamic has been clearly discernible in the Dutch and the Austrian cases.

Finally, the populist moment may have set in motion its own countervailing dynamics: by highlighting the increasingly realistic threat of a disintegrating Europe and an unravelling of the NATO umbrella, it may have mobilised a crucial segment of centrist and risk-averse voters to turn towards the mainstream. Before electoral surveys emerge that allow researchers to adjudicate between these competing explanations, progressive forces can only hope that a trend reversal is indeed under way.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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