

Now give us our own referendum: how Brexit could energise Europe's insurgent parties

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*The Brexit vote could be an early sign of a European political tsunami, as upstart “insurgent” political parties across the continent use referendums as their weapon of choice to challenge the traditional political elites, write **Suzi Dennison** and **Dina Pardijs**. Their [research](#) for the European Council on Foreign Relations found that these parties are calling for a total of 34 popular referendums on subjects from their country's membership to the EU to specific policy issues such as refugee relocation quotas. They surveyed the foreign policy positions of the insurgent parties, including their attitudes to Putin, Trump, the war in Syria and the migrant crisis.*



Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) supporters gather in Venice in 2015 for a 'Night of Honesty'. Photo: [Giuseppe Tiozzo](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

ECFR carried out the first comprehensive survey of Europe's insurgent parties – newer, smaller and leaner parties, ranging from the hard left to the far right. It found that, despite their differences, they share a surprising range of beliefs on foreign policy. They are broadly sceptical about the EU; oppose intervention abroad, particularly in the Middle East; are unenthusiastic about the relationship with Washington; and positively inclined towards Putin's Russia.

[The world according to Europe's insurgent parties: Putin, migration and people power](#) analyses the foreign policy positions of 45 insurgent parties, based on interviews with their foreign policy teams by ECFR researchers across the 28 EU member states. This is the first time these parties have been interviewed in-depth on their foreign policies.

The parties surveyed range from France's Communist Party and Germany's leftist Die Linke, through to the far-right and anti-immigrant Golden Dawn in Greece, Lega Nord in Italy and Jobbik in Hungary. All but three hold at least one seat in national or European Parliament. However, their real means of exerting power is their ability to capture the media agenda and challenge the establishment, rather than working within it.

Insurgent parties are having success in certain areas. The British referendum on EU membership was the result of years of campaigning by the UK Independence Party (UKIP), while Italy's Five Star Movement won the mayorship of Rome and Turin in June.

The report argues that the growing pressure for popular referendums could hamstring key European decision-making bodies. For instance, the upcoming European Council decision on whether to extend EU sanctions against Russia, and the question of a free trade agreement with Ukraine, could be complicated by the Dutch vote in May to reject closer ties between the EU and Ukraine.

It concludes that foreign policy is no longer an elite game.

Among the challenger parties:

1. Most, 28 in total, thought that a Brexit vote in the UK referendum would trigger **EU disintegration**. Most, but not all, believed that this would be a good thing. Most parties believed that it would trigger further referenda in the EU.
2. Most showed a strong suspicion of cooperation with **Turkey** on the refugee crisis and particular opposition to Turkish accession 36 parties oppose the EU-Turkey deal on the refugee crisis, many of them voicing concern about the EU-Turkey deal because it will lead to closer co-operation between the EU and Turkey. On other issues, 23 opposed cooperation with Turkey on the war in Syria, and 24 against terrorism. On other issues such as the Ukraine crisis and the eurozone crisis, very few parties could see a case for talking to Turkey at all
3. The challenger parties are contributing to the European Parliament's increasingly assertive role in foreign policy, as seen in their opposition to elements of the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal. The great majority of the challenger parties have representation in the EP, and many of them are stronger at this level than nationally. As they grow in influence, they are likely to use the consultation role of the EP on international agreements reached under CFSP to push their agenda.
4. Merkel's 'refugees welcome' policy is not widely blamed as the cause of the migration crisis: only seven parties named it in their top two explanations for the Crisis. US strategy in the Middle East was the most popular answer, with President Assad's regime sponsored violence in Syria in second place in the responses given.
5. There is **no appetite** among these parties **for intervention in Syria**: On the prospect of collective European involvement in intervention in Syria 32 parties responded that this option should not even be on the table. This is linked to a general anti-Americanism, and a distaste for the EU towing the US line particularly on foreign policy in the Middle East.
6. There is widespread **opposition to the Ukraine's path to EU accession**. Only 14 parties responded unequivocally that they supported it, and of these two wouldn't support NATO accession for Ukraine.
7. There is scepticism around future European or US interventionism generally, particularly in the Middle East, from Sinn Fein in Ireland, to UKIP in the UK, to the Front National and the Communist Party in France, to AFD and Die Linke in Germany, to Jobbik in Hungary and the Five Star Movement in Italy. These parties are likely to bolster the intervention fatigue trend in EU foreign policy over coming years, making it even more difficult for national governments to sell the idea of future military deployment to their populations.
8. Despite differences between the parties, there was consensus in the external threats faced by the EU. For 36 out of the 45 parties covered, the **refugee crisis** or the threat of **terrorism and radical Islamism** (these issues were inextricably linked in the responses that the majority of parties gave) represented the top or top two priorities for the EU. This response was not the preserve of the right wing: Die Linke in Germany; the French Communist Party, Podemos in Spain, and the Lithuanian Labour Party were also among those who voted in this way.
9. Suspicions among these parties about the transatlantic relationship are partly fuelled by **opposition to the Transatlantic Trade Treaty (TTIP)**, with 26 out of the parties arguing that the EU should not conclude a TTIP with the US at all. But there were some notable exceptions including the Sweden Democrats; Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, Estonia Party of People's Unity, ALFA in Germany, Syriza and Independent

Greeks who saw the potential for it to be positive under the right conditions.

10. The parties confessed to having little understanding of today's China and how to work with it. There is no real evidence of more support for engagement with China from parties on the right or left: 15 parties simply had no official position.
11. The parties are most divided on how to engage with **Russia**. Although there is a general spread of sympathy for Russian foreign policy (30 parties expressed agreement with at least some recent Russian positions, including particularly for their intervention in Syria in the absence of other actors playing a decisive conflict resolution role) there were more mixed views on whether EU sanctions should be maintained and whether NATO should build up militarily against the Russian threat. These views on Russia policy do not fall naturally along the lines of 'left' and 'right' groupings.
12. **Many agree with Trump's argument that Europeans and others need to pay their way more within the NATO** alliance and have a vision of a militarily strong Europe that invests more in its own security – largely at national level – and is consequently independent from the US.
13. The overwhelming majority saw the need for European solutions to specific current challenges. This was least pronounced on the Eurozone crisis where 20 parties opted for European level solutions; scaling up to 24 in favour of European solutions on the refugee crisis, 29 on the Syrian war and 28 on Ukraine; and 34 on terrorism.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It is an edited extract from the introduction to the European Council on Foreign Relations' report, [The World According to Europe's Insurgent Parties](#).

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