

## How to tackle populism: Macron vs Kurz



This time last year, things did not look pretty for the EU, writes [Michael Cottakis](#). Marine Le Pen topped the polls in France spreading fears over Frexit, Geert Wilders had crept clear of his challengers in the Netherlands, and EU officials glanced worriedly at an Austria dealing with its own far-right challenge. In all three cases, the populist challenge fell short, but with more key elections on the calendar for 2018, what lessons can be drawn by those seeking to tackle populism?



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In the wake of the Brexit shock and the election of Donald Trump, commentators would be forgiven for fearing – perhaps even expecting – a collapse in 2017. On this, their fears were to prove unfounded. As is generally the case in ‘normal’ elections, the populists did not win. Instead, last year saw two distinct counter-populism strategies in action. Both were successful in defeating dangerous opponents. Yet, while one offers reason for optimism, the other involves considerable long-term risk.

Last year's star electoral performers were Emmanuel Macron and Sebastian Kurz. The two leaders are often bundled together by the international media – seen as part of the same wave of youthful politicians sweeping the West. Both claim that they are tackling populism. However, beyond the obvious ideological differences, the strategies they use to address the populist threat display fundamental contrasts.

### Adoption

Sebastian Kurz employed some skill in preventing the far-right Freedom Party from emerging first at the recent elections in Austria. But this political manoeuvring comes at a cost. His method for tackling populism is the adoption approach. The strategy attempts to borrow many of the populist's arguments, rendering his/her political party toothless in an election. A centre-right party might adopt far-right anti-immigration discourse. The centre-left might engage in unrealistic rhetoric around social welfare and public spending. Sebastian Kurz is a canny exponent of the adoption approach.

The re-branding of his Austrian People's Party forestalled a tougher stance on immigration, while he borrowed the far-right's polemical rhetoric on EU 'Zentralisierung', or 'centralisation'. By the end of the campaign, the dividing lines between the centre-right and far-right were sufficiently blurred for one to ask: which is the populist? The subsequent announcement of a coalition government involving the far right is a cause for great concern.



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### Counter vision

Emmanuel Macron used different tools. His counter-vision approach involved debunking the tenuous promises made by his populist adversary Marine Le Pen, while offering attractive alternative arguments. This is the harder of the two to pull off. It requires an individual of political skill and personal charisma with the courage to confront the populist head-on, without fear of disturbing the ideological balance of one's party. In his presidential election campaign, Macron offered a text-book example of how to deploy the counter-vision. He directly attacked Le Pen and her anti-euro arguments – and skilfully exposed their paucity. In so doing, he provided a convincing defence of France's role in the European Union, while appealing to French patriotism.

Of the two, the Macron approach offers greatest optimism. In directly confronting, rebuking, and debunking Le Pen he demonstrated that the empress wore no clothes. But he also presented a vision of a hopeful EU future – an EU that, with suitable reform, still offers the only salient means of magnifying France's global influence, while protecting it from the worst aspects of globalisation.



On the other hand, the Kurz strategy is a dangerous one. When a figure – and party – of the so-called establishment adopts the policies and rhetorical devices of an extreme opponent, and where electoral considerations trump sound policy making, the outlook promises to be grim. The Kurz approach, if followed by others, will equate to a gentle 'hollowing out' of the European Project from within. Europe might be spared the Austrian Freedom Party, or indeed the Front National in power. But, if the Austrian and French centre-right adopt their policies anyway, what difference does it make?

For the time being, the adoption strategy seems more popular among Europe's centrist parties than the counter-vision. Beyond Kurz, the best-known exemplar is the British Conservative Party, with Brexit the sorry outcome. In the Netherlands, Mark Rutte has demonstrated a clear rightward shift in his positioning on immigration, while Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU has not been immune from the temptation to deploy the strategy.

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But why adoption over the counter vision? The absence of a firm EU narrative, owned and felt by citizens, means that politicians find it difficult to 'sell' the EU to their constituents. Macron found success by appealing to France's own special place at the EU's core. But the Macron package could not easily be applied, for instance, to the Czech Republic, to Denmark, or indeed to Greece. An EU-wide counter vision is more necessary than ever in the long battle against nationalist populism – and one group will be central to its articulation.

## The 89ers

The 89ers are young Europeans born around 1989 and the collapse of communism: citizens who have grown up with the benefits of EU membership, knowing only peace. As the future generation of European leaders, the 89ers hold a special responsibility to create, own and implement a fresh vision for the EU.

This must transcend national boundaries and speak to citizens of different regional and social backgrounds. The original aim of European integration was peace on the continent after centuries of bloody conflict. While it must not be taken for granted, this has largely been achieved.

A new vision and set of EU objectives must reflect features of international cooperation that today inspire and are of most value to Europeans. It must centre on extending the benefits of greater connectivity – digital, technological, mobility-related – to more Europeans. It must build on the theme of greater opportunity – where the EU makes more people more prosperous, keeping the best, while protecting citizens from the worst aspects of globalisation. It must also highlight the principle of solidarity – an EU demonstrating a social and humanitarian dimension, across member states and civil societies.

These principles should form the basis for a closer relationship between the institutions and EU citizens. Ultimately, they must find articulation in a new institutional design for the EU that establishes greater flexibility in some areas and deeper integration in others.

In 2018, this debate will be at its most fervent. The 89ers promise, as ever, to be at its vanguard.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



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