Migration’s Influence on Euroscepticism and Political Radicalism

1. Background

Migration has always been a major issue in EU politics, however following the arrival of 1 million asylum seekers in 2015 migration became a defining issue for politics across the EU. The European Union was extremely visible during this crisis and was criticised for an ineffective Frontex, an unfair compulsory refugee reallocation program, the failure of Schengen, and unwanted visa liberalisation with Turkey. This reignited criticisms of democratic deficit, German dominance and a lack of solidarity, which emerged from the Eurozone Crisis. Eurosceptic and far-Right parties exploited fears of uncontrolled migration from the Middle-East, encouraged by an unrestrained EU, and achieved huge electoral gains in national parliaments and at the European Parliament. Many European countries also witnessed large scale protests, anti-migrant violence,

2. Conference Objectives

The conference is part of a 7 event series called the European Citizen Initiative to Combat Political Extremism and Euroscepticism, which aims to strengthen the European Citizen's understanding of the European Union. The project aims to combat the Eurosceptic and nationalist narratives by educating European citizens about the reality behind these ideologies through reasoned debate and empower them to spread the discussion to their communities. It also aims to inform EU citizens of the crucial functions of the European Union, and its importance for European prosperity and social order. This conference focused on the impact of migration on Euroscepticism and Political Radicalism. Migration has been an undeniable boost for nationalist and Eurosceptic parties in Europe, yet the debate over the migration crisis has been extremely shallow. There has been a cognitive dissonance between the actual impact and distribution of refugees, and the media coverage and political rhetoric. This conference therefore aims to challenge the claims of the Eurosceptic and nationalist parties, whilst also addressing the deficits of the EU in both responding to migration and communicating with EU citizens. The conference also aims to provide practical solutions for policy makers tackle issues such as successful integration and political communion.

3. Conference Structure

The conference was held in European House in Prague on the 27th of May 2016. The speakers were invited from academia, think-tanks, government and civil society organisations across Europe. 50 people participated in a lively discussion of the issues, including: the Austrian ambassador to the Czech Republic, Alexander Grubmayr, the Slovak ambassador to the Czech Republic, Peter Weiss, and a representative of the Portuguese embassy in the Czech Republic, Filipe Alexandre. The conference was organised intro 2 panels:
1. Euroscepticism
2. Political Radicalism and Populism

The conference was managed by the Institute for Politics and Society and the event was recorded by video, photo and some of the presentations are available online. In addition to the main discussion of the conference, the speakers participated in 3 informal events for further discussion and co-ordination, both before and after the conference.

4. Conference partners

The conference was organised by the Institute for Politics and Society in cooperation with the Republikon Institute in Hungary as part of the transnational project: European Citizens Initiative to Combat Political Extremism and Euroscepticism. The conference was financed by the Europe for Citizens program of the European Commission and was held in co-operation with European House, Prague; an information center for the European Parliament and European Commission.

5. Conference discussions

Panel A: Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is related to uncertainty over the structure and direction of the EU. People question their vulnerability through the single market and fear further changes. Euroscepticism sharply rose after the Financial Crisis and the same concerns were reinforced by the handling of the Migration Crisis. The Brexit referendum is a very visible result of the penetration of Euroscepticism into the mainstream. While Euroscepticism often goes hand-in-hand with populism, it also reflects legitimate concerns of European citizens. Panel A discussed Euroscepticism in relation to 4 topics: Sovereignty, migration, the internal market and national borders.

Each speaker was invited to discuss these topics in an evolving debate, and then the floor was opened to questions and discussion. The session was moderated by Václav Bacovský, project manager at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Prague office, and former research fellow. The speakers in this panel were from civil society organisations, the European Parliament and government. They are presented in the order of their first discussion.

Václav Bacovský, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

Mr Bacovský firstly presented on the distance between the purposes of the EU, peace and prosperity, and how it is viewed by EU citizens. He argued that European citizens have wealth and peace, yet will have less prosperity than their parents. Euroscepticism is a trend which seeks to focus the blame for this on the EU, therefore the debate must be re-framed in a more positive way.

Irena Krasnická, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

Mrs Krasnická, speaking in a personal capacity, agreed with Mr Bacovský and argued that real opposition to the EU is a very small proportion that have been dangerously projected as representative. In addition, EU politics are dangerously simplified by national politicians.

Pavel Telička, European Parliament, Czech Republic

Mr Telička argued that the EU is facing a crisis of politics with irresponsible rhetoric from politicians and media. He advocated reform after the result of the Brexit referendum to tackle the problem of political communication and refocus the debate towards the economic benefits of the EU.

Benjamin Tallis, Institute for International Relations, UK

Mr Tallis pointed out that the Eurosceptic debate is also one which interacts with the free market debate, and is therefore represented on both sides of the political spectrum. He posited that there is a need to revisit Lisbon, and that there has been a failure of effective leadership and media in the EU.
Csaba Tóth, Republikon Foundation, Hungary

Mr Tóth argued that the EU has always been in a state of crisis and that the real issue is complacency in tackling today's challenges. He further argued that the response to the migration crisis shouldn't be just economic, since this crisis is firmly political.

Questions focused on EU responses to the Migration Crisis and Brexit. Mrs Krasnická was critical of the lack of preparation for irregular migration and deficits of soft measures to reduce the impact of integration. Mr Tallis similarly criticised the lack of common border policy and advocated the creation of an EU mobility ombudsman. Mr Tóth took a more positive view that the EU system is designed to be consensual and its responses will improve given time. The speakers generally agreed that the creation of an inclusive EU identity would be an effective response to both Brexit and better integration of migrants.

Panel B: Political radicalism and populism

Political radicalism is characterised by the success of far-Right or far-Left parties in electoral politics, and contemporary European politics has seen a large shift to the right of the political spectrum, which typically opposed migration. France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria have all seen jumps in support for far-Right parties. These parties share many similarities and rhetoric with populist parties, which emerged to fill the gap left by centrist parties after the Financial Crisis. The topic of this panel was: why have they emerged? How have they been successful? And how can they be opposed?

Each speaker made a 10-15 minute presentation, and then the floor was opened to questions and discussion. The session was moderated by Petra Vejvodová, head of security studies at Masaryk University, and expert on right-wing extremism and propaganda. The speakers in this panel were primarily from an academic background and are presented in the order of their presentation.

Robert Ormrod, Aarhus University, Denmark

Mr Ormrod presented on the practical topic of combating political extremism using social media marketing. He argued that nationalist parties should not have a monopoly on effective propaganda and that social media approaches can be extremely effective at dismantling nationalist narratives. Since people no longer support one overriding political identity in today's society, they will respond to a well-crafted, emotional story that relates to the everyday reality of voters. The framing of the message is key and effective political messages should be: short, positive, relatable, use recognisable people and should be unified into one message across social platforms.

Tamás Lattmann, Institute for International Relations, Hungary

Mr Lattmann presented on the differentiation between the need for constructive debate with Eurosceptics, who may have valid concerns, and what he terms are those manifestly untrue statements which represent an abuse of the lack of knowledge of the general public. Mr Lattmann clarified his position using the example of the Hungarian referendum on the EU relocation program, which was informed by false claims and phrased to make a 'no' almost certain. In contrast, he argued that a positive engagement would have been a court challenge at the CJEU.

Christian Kvorning Lassen, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Denmark

Mr Lassen presented on the use of Euroscepticism as a shield for populist parties to hide their lack of robust policies. He argued that the EU became associated with crises and has therefore been typified as the 'other' in opposition to a handy nation-state identity. EU politics are simplified by populist parties, who are more effective at political communication, and used as an excuse for poor national performance.

Roman Joch, Civic Institute, Czech Republic

Mr Joch presented on the link between the rise of Eurosceptic and far-Right parties, and the cartelisation of EU politics. Mr Joch argued that the liberal control of the European Parliament and European Commission means that citizens who
object do not have a responsible opposition to vote for. In respect to the migration crisis, he argued that European citizens do not oppose gradual migration, but large ‘waves’, which they see as a violation of the social contract.

**Jan Macháček**, Institute for the Politics and Society, Czech Republic

Mr Macháček argued that populist rhetoric is far more dangerous in Eastern Europe due to their relatively underdeveloped democratic structures. He also made the link between the current migration crisis and many of the crises the EU has faced since 2008, arguing that the EU lacks proper crisis response mechanisms; which are largely organised ad hoc.

Questions to the panel focussed on the ethical nature of constructing targeting social media communication, to which the response was that it is necessary and a part of the modern reality in political communication. In addition, there was agreement over the necessity for a political release valve in the EU’s institutional structure. The speakers and questioners also clarified that the economics of this migration wave will depend on the manner of integration, although initial reports suggest that it will be positive.

**6. Conclusions of the conference and informal discussions**

The conference brought together a number of leading experts in ideology, identity and EU politics, who presented a high level discussion on migration's influence on Euroscepticism and political radicalism. Discussion in informal events before and after the conference reinforced the conclusions of the two panels. 4 main conclusions were drawn from the panels and discussions:

1. There is a failure of communication: EU citizens are not sufficiently informed about the realities of migration and EU politics. There is a strong failure of the media to act as a fourth estate to populist politicians who oversimplify events to mislead the public.
2. There is a crisis of leadership both within the EU and at the member state level: Politicians are not providing sufficient leadership to oppose majority opinions when they do not reflect reality.
3. The structure of EU politics is contributing to the problem: a lack of effective political communication with EU citizens, along with insufficient opportunities for opposition are facilitating Euroscepticism and political radicalism.
4. A general need for better debate of these issues

The conference was very successful in both bringing together experts to consolidate research and experience into clear conclusions of causes and solutions for Euroscepticism and political radicalism, and providing a high level of debate to inform the public.