



# COUNTERING POPULIST MOBILIZATION

Response strategies for the political mainstream

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## Rollback of Democracy? Current Trajectories of Democratic Development in Europe

This paper is part of the event series “Rollback of Democracy? Current Trajectories of Democratic Development in Europe – From Diagnosis to Remedies”, organized by the School of Public Policy at CEU in cooperation with the Hertie School of Governance in 2014. The overall aim of the series is to address concerns about democratic developments in Europe through conducting a methodical analysis of the current state of democracy and developing policy tools and recommendations for addressing the current rollback of democracy.

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# Introduction

The rise of populist parties poses a growing challenge to mainstream politics across the European Union. In recent years populist parties have scored notable electoral successes across the continent. The 2014 European Parliamentary elections were a clear signal of this broad-based ascent, disrupting the political landscape in many European countries. Marine Le Pen's Front National and Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party emerged as the strongest contestants in France and the United Kingdom, each achieving almost 25 percent of the votes in their respective countries. In Germany, the nine percent score of the newly-created Alternative for Germany marked a dramatic rupture with former Chancellor Helmut Kohl's assertion that there must not be a democratically legitimate party to the right of his Christian Democratic Union party. Scandinavia has also seen dramatic political changes thanks to the growing prominence of populist parties such as the True Finns and the Danish People's Party, epitomized by the collapse of the Social Democratic government in Sweden two months into its tenure at the hands of the right-wing Sweden Democrats in late 2014.

While populist right-wing and Eurosceptic parties are far from forming a cohesive group across EU member states, it is clear that wherever they appear, they are filling a space that used to be comfortably occupied by mainstream political parties. In their rhetoric and through their electoral successes, they signal an increasing contestation of the core values underpinning the European Union, such as openness, the free movement of people, and the value of diversity. However, what underpins their strength even more than their goals are the successful mobilization strategies they employ – particularly at a time when mainstream parties have become increasingly ineffective in sustaining lasting electoral support from their core constituencies. This raises questions that go to the core of Europe's liberal democratic system. It questions what strategies can be employed by political and civil society actors to protect the egalitarian values that underpin Europe's identity, and that are increasingly challenged by populist mobilization.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the mechanisms of populist mobilization. It explores how to revive democratic mobilization in a way that effectively counters populist parties. To do this, the emphasis is placed on the means of animating political support, the set of actions employed by populist political actors that have been shown to be so effective in the current context. We look at the process of populist mobilization as a "sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people" (Jansen 2011:82)<sup>1</sup>.

The argument advanced in this paper is that the success of populist mobilization in Europe is underpinned by three contextual factors: (1) the decline of broad-based party mobilization and the increasing focus on problem-solving policies; (2) the rise of new forms of mobilization and new anxieties that have deprived traditional parties from being the primary vehicles of social contestation; and (3) the adoption of "light-populism" by mainstream parties, contributing to the legitimation and appeal of populist political agendas. All three factors combine to increasingly restrict the political space for mainstream politics. Effectively countering this rise of populist mobilization requires reviving democratic mobilization on the same terms, but with a focus on dismantling rather than endorsing their arguments and crafting a unifying narrative to sustain this engagement with a strong vision for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to populist parties or populist political actors in the remainder of the paper, it is in reference to political actors that predominantly rely on this kind of mobilization strategies, no matter how extreme their ideologies or programs are. In this sense, we distinguish between populist and democratic mobilization.

## I.

## Decline of broad-based party mobilization

The decline of party identification is not a new phenomenon in Europe, but it is increasingly affecting the political process. Despite important national differences, one can observe declining party identification and an increasing decoupling between party identification and voting behaviour across Europe (Thomassen 2005). Party affiliation in and of itself no longer guarantees political mobilization along broad programmatic lines. As class and ideology have lost the power to bind large groups in society to a particular political grouping, parties have also lost their ability to engage large swathes of society in coordinated political actions. Instead, parties increasingly see the political process in terms of output-oriented legitimacy and prioritized problem-solving over mass involvement. Parties, the natural intermediaries between citizen engagement and the political process, have increasingly become akin to “office-seeking machines” (Mair 2006), competing primarily on the basis of their ability to deliver rather than the force of specific political ideas, visions, or a sense of purpose. As a result, the deep and protracted process of political mobilization, in the sense of rallying large groups of people to express themselves politically behind a specific political agenda, has become increasingly discarded from the toolbox of mainstream politics.

The effects of this shift become clear when examining the main steps in the policy process: “the ways in which people struggle to define issues as problems worthy of attention on government agendas; how people analyze problems and devise and select among policy alternatives; how people implement policy; and how people evaluate and sometimes terminate policy” (deLeon et al. 2010). The ideal-type process frames citizen participation and policymaking as two parallel and mutually reinforcing processes. Parties are the catalysts that bring those two processes together, creating a structural link between citizen support and political mobilization, and thereby generating the ability to act and implement decisions and policies (Fig. 1). In this logic, “parties are understood to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry; to articulate and aggregate interests, and translate these into public policy; to recruit and promote political leaders; and to organize parliament, the government and the key institutions of the state” (Mair 2006). ‘Mobilize the citizenry’ is the operative phrase involving not just a passive sensing of the popular mood but suggesting also an active effort to convince people of the importance of specific political ideas. But as parties become less representative, and less able and willing to sustain deep citizen engagement, this link between effective citizen participation and the policy process becomes increasingly fragile and turns into a vulnerability that populists can exploit.

Fig. 1: The ideal-type policy process

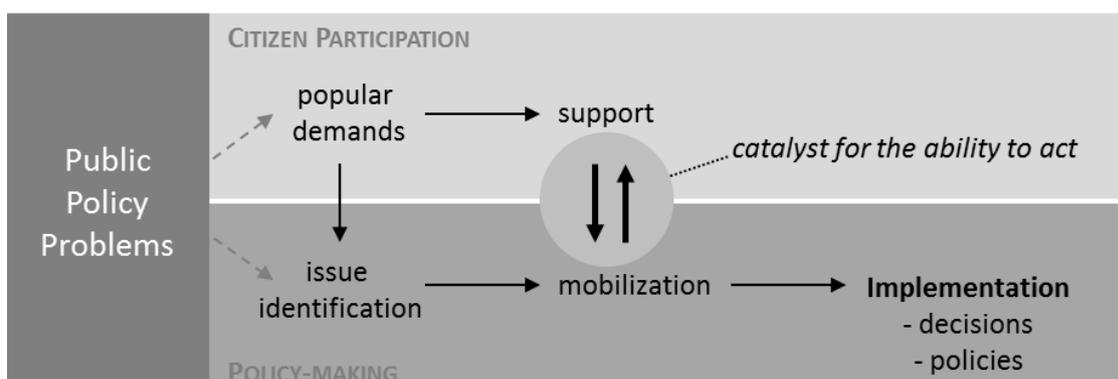
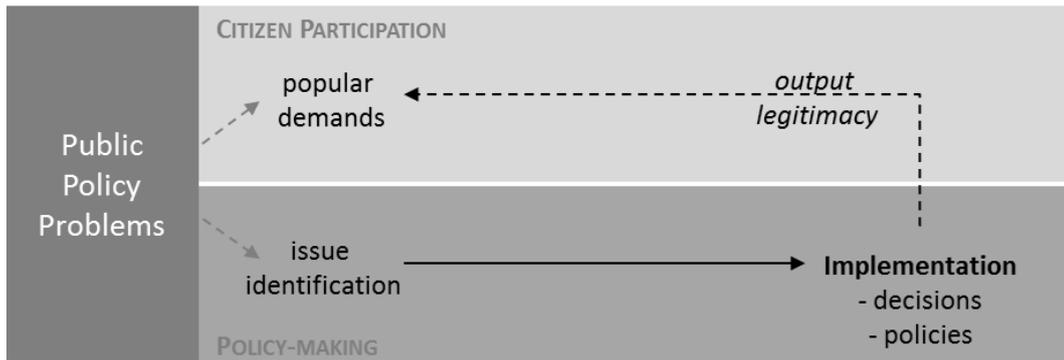


Fig. 2: The mechanical policy process



In practice, the policy process has become increasingly mechanical. There is a growing tendency to directly translate issues into implementation strategies (Fig. 2). Rather than engaging in far-reaching political mobilization, policies are increasingly presented as being “without alternative” (as was the case, for example, with measures to address the crisis in the Eurozone). As a consequence, voters perceive that the only way of differentiating among mainstream parties is their capacity to deliver rather than the substance of policies. This is a particularly dangerous conclusion when governments are increasingly constrained by policy challenges that transcend the realms of national political influence. The void resulting from the absence of a catalyst that spurs a democratic process of citizen engagement and the perceived failure of governments to deliver creates a wide opening that populists can exploit. This leads to a situation where governments implement policies that do not address the concerns of the electorate and compete against populists who are not concerned about the need to implement their agendas. As Mair (2006) put it, “the former give us identical policies everywhere and no politics; the latter, you might say, give us politics and no policies” (emphasis added).

This change in the policy process has shifted what used to be a political confrontation along ideological lines, spanning the traditional political spectrum, to being a competition about competence and responsibility. Parties base campaigns on their ability to address economic problems or other pressing issues rather than proposing and competing for public support behind bold ideas and visions that promote the public good. Elected officials are seen more as administrators with a responsibility to deliver certain goods rather than representatives of society with a broader legitimacy. Discarding political mobilization from the policy process disengages the voter from “owning” the political agenda and nurtures a feeling among people that they are being governed by detached elites – providing an opportunity for populist mobilization. Before considering the substance of this contestation, it is important to acknowledge this procedural aspect that allows populist political actors to enter a largely unoccupied space of citizen engagement.

## II.

# New forms of mobilization and new anxieties

While political mobilization has lost its centrality in the policy process, it has also changed its forms and venues. Across Europe, citizens have mobilized in large numbers around specific issues, such as online privacy or matters of social inclusion. But those issue-specific mobilization campaigns often take place outside the realm of traditional party activism and follow the logic of new social media-based communities. They do not clearly follow party lines and can easily bring together supporters from across the political spectrum. Some of these movements have been deliberately designed to defy established institutions, creating non-hierarchical networks as alternatives to traditional politics. By their very nature, broad-based political parties have been less effective in connecting with these issue-based movements than single-issue populist actors who can easily attach themselves to such popular movements and generate political capital from them.

As Anduiza et al. (2014) point out in their analysis of the Indignados movement in Spain, “the whole process took place outside the reach (and to some extent against) political parties and unions.” Moreover, participants in this mass movement “had significantly lower levels of previous political activity and organizational involvement than participants in other demos,” and the mobilization effort was underpinned by a “privileged use of digital media and particularly social networks that have produced a case of personalized digitally networked action.” This allowed the movement to “channel collective outrage through many small organizations with little mobilization experience and through networked individuals who responded to a common concern on interrelated issues.” As such, it was particularly successful in mobilizing “unsatisfied but politically inactive individuals” (Anduiza 2014). Although this is a very specific case, the dynamics of this movement reflect the new types of mobilization networks that operate outside of political party structures.

The success of such large-scale mobilization campaigns lies in their clear issue focus and relative ease of engagement for individual citizens. This is particularly true in the online space where the cost of participation is significantly reduced. Yet, this very fact also bears risks for the political process. As Karpf points out in his comprehensive review of online political mobilization, “minimal-effort engagement holds long-term costs for the public sphere, either by further dispiriting the issue publics who find their online petitions and e-comments ignored, or by crowding out more substantive participatory efforts” (Karpf 2010). The relative ease with which citizens can engage in these movements masks the complexity of implementing and sustaining transformative political change. In fact, many of these issue-based movements fail to create actual bonds among their participants in a way that gives them common focus, creating a collective political voice in the way that parties or traditional civil society groups are able to do. In that sense, “it is easier to generate ‘stop energy’—that is, the reaction of individuals to crises—than the ‘go energy’ created by people working together to solve common problems” (Sifry 2014), favouring populists without a constructive long-term political agenda.

Accentuating these dynamics are new anxieties shared among many parts of society about a perceived economic decline, and the loss of sovereignty and national identity in an increasingly connected global economy. These anxieties have become the focus of populist mobilization. At a time of rising fears of external developments, be it globalization or European integration, populist political actors have managed to craft strong and attractive unifying narratives that respond to these fears. With these tangible economic and societal shifts and the absence of deep citizen engagement from the political mainstream, established parties are easily discredited as being unconcerned with issues that are most important to “average” people. Most populist mobilization therefore takes on an anti-establishment dimension, calling on reason and the common will of regular people in the country. Populists offer what they would describe as the only alternative to a direction that is seen as undesirable – in the case of Eurosceptic parties, the pro-European elite consensus.

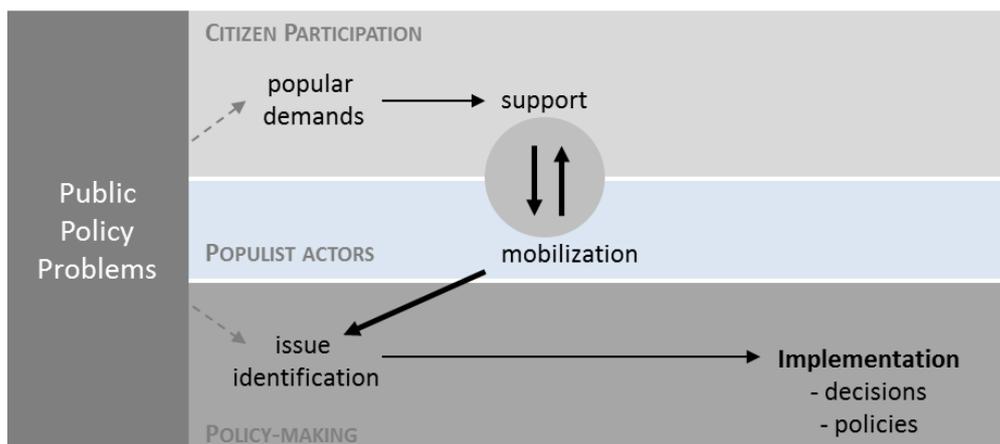
More fundamentally, these anxieties mark a shift in the overall political bargain in Europe, expressed by a sentiment that the distribution of surpluses from economic growth is gradually being replaced by the allocation of losses among different groups in society. This sentiment drives a much more defensive political posture, one vulnerable to populist mobilization that is not concerned with developing viable political solutions but simply mass mobilization. As William Galston put it, the old bargain in which elite bureaucracies “deliver economic growth with steady reductions in poverty, rising standards of living for all, expanding physical and economic security” has been replaced by “the politics of blame: if something has gone wrong, someone (else) must be responsible—wealthy malefactors, corrupt government officials, immigrants, even foreign conspiracies” (Galston 2014). The result is an all-out loss of trust in government and the governing class that is apparent in numerous public opinion surveys across the continent. The difficulty of achieving tangible results in this context, seen as bringing genuine societal improvements rather than trade-offs that shift losses from one group to another, encourages more opportunistic political behaviour. Indeed, political dithering or experiments with light-populism can be seen as a third key factor driving populist mobilization in Europe.

### III.

## Populism begets populists: the impact of light-populism

Deprived of output legitimacy, and with populists able to present themselves as the only political actors who 'respond' to the concerns of the population, mainstream parties find themselves scrambling to catch up by adopting and mobilizing on the basis of a populist political agenda, as depicted in Fig. 3. This dynamic causes the policy process to turn upside down: mobilization becomes a one-way street and populist sentiments dominate an increasingly limited policy space. Herein lies the challenge for the political mainstream: to implement 'responsible' policies while at the same time neutralizing the mobilization potential – and hence agenda-setting power – exercised by populist political actors.

Fig. 3: The impact of populism



The appeal of populism today lies in suggesting a way of holding the established political class accountable for the kind of anxieties explored in the previous section, and in proposing simple solutions to complex political challenges. By deliberately ignoring or misrepresenting the complex causes of events and the incremental nature of political progress, populist mobilization exploits the widespread desire for easy and comforting answers to these protracted questions in society. The consequence is a distortion of the public discourse on the political challenges we face, and a temptation by the political mainstream to compete with populists on their terms. Rather than seeing political mobilization as a process aimed at convincing a sceptical public of difficult but important policy choices, the acceptance by the political mainstream of an agenda set by populist interpretations of policy challenges contributes to the pathologies of the political process in Europe today.

The logic of light-populism is apparent in many areas of the political discourse in Europe. Examples of the political mainstream's tacit endorsement of the populist agenda range from challenging the basic principles of the freedom of movement within the EU to the debate on the future of the European Monetary Union. In this logic, identifying the subject of populist mobilization, whether it consists of a fear of overcrowding or unfair support for fiscal profligacy, and proposing symbolic responses to address these concerns may be seen as an easy way of attracting votes. In reality, however, it legitimizes the political platform upon which populist political actors perform and are able to outbid the mainstream by offering more radical responses. As Hopi Sen put it, "by suggesting populist objectives but ultimately proposing only relatively minor adjustments in policy, the electorate is disappointed when you fail to achieve what your rhetoric hinted you would like to" (Sen 2014).

While mainstream parties have employed light-populism in electoral campaigns, they have often come to adopt more pragmatic positions in the face of political realities upon election. The Hollande government's campaign on the wealth tax in France is a case in point. Studies have shown that the support for populist political actors grows even stronger when mainstream parties backtrack from their positions. Through an analysis of party programs and voting patterns in several EU countries, Lochocki (2014) shows that populist extremist parties can only score significant electoral successes when an established, moderate party has initially put forward a light-populist agenda. The widely-observed positional shifts among mainstream parties are a key driving force that open a legitimized programmatic niche for populist parties and then amplify their appeal through voter dissatisfaction with the performance of a mainstream incumbent.

One of the elements that underpin the strength of populist mobilization is the way mainstream parties campaign for political support. It is at this point then that response strategies need to be developed in order to revive democratic mobilization within the political mainstream. Clearly articulating the nature and complexity of policy-making rather than disguising and simplifying the problems that exist is an important first step. It requires making realistic commitments about what can be achieved through the political process and what other actors in society need to do to contribute to those goals. Another aspect that is often distorted by populist mobilization is an unrealistic expectation of the ease and speed of enacting significant political change. Being realistic about what can be achieved and how quickly is an important aspect of building trust in the political process and preventing disillusionment.

# Reviving democratic mobilization

Countering populist mobilization, therefore, needs to be about rebuilding the link between the policy process and citizen participation. This is essential to close the void that is increasingly being used by parties from the fringes, whether it is on the political left or right. While established ideologies may have lost the ability to rally large parts of society behind a coherent political agenda, there is a growing opportunity for effective political entrepreneurship to build new value- and purpose-based networks that recreate this mobilizing power at the center of the political process. The challenge lies in energizing politics without resorting to light-populism.

If the neglect of political mobilization and the adoption of light-populism have contributed to the emergence of parties and actors that focus purely on occupying this void, it is precisely there – in the combat of ideas between citizen and the policy process – that response strategies need to take effect. But rather than simply succumbing to a populist political agenda, there is a need to engage with the substance of populist arguments, revealing inconsistencies, and gradually build momentum for alternative interpretations that are accepted and understood by the wider public. This means working with a range of actors to build broad-based support, starting with framing and understanding current challenges. There may be less knee-jerk political mobilization (i.e. people supporting a specific political agenda simply because of party affiliation or their membership in a particular social group), which makes the political process more cumbersome. But this does not mean that political mobilization cannot be successful in its traditional sense as a quest for building support behind transformative political ideas.

Bringing back citizen participation as a key focus of the overall policy-making process thus stands out as a key priority. Doing so requires a skilful use of different avenues, which connect various disjointed efforts at social mobilization. Parties need to become more effective at transforming isolated pockets of activity into sustained and effective political engagement. Being able to orchestrate distributed networks of activities that ultimately contribute to the same overarching objective does not come naturally to established political parties. It represents a new way of operating, but holds the potential to significantly increase a capacity that seems to have gotten lost in the political mainstream. What is needed is to effectively reach the disgruntled part of the electorate that is the key target for populist mobilization, and to open avenues to keep them involved in substantive discussions on the themes that matter to them in order to sustain a more long-term political support base.

This means that the political mainstream needs to reach out to the “reluctant radicals” (Fieschi et al. 2012), those people who reluctantly embrace populist agendas for a perceived lack of better alternatives. Rebuilding trust in the political process and engaging in substantive discussions about the subject of populist mobilization, without embracing the validity of their claims or the desirability of their policies, stands a real chance of winning over this reluctant part of the electorate. But it will require proposing concrete and realizable steps that can create a sense of achievement rather than fostering disillusionment. Above all, this implies a consistency in the way campaigns, political mobilization, and policy implementation are pursued. The established tactic of campaigning by lurching to the extremes to attract the widest possible vote and then backtracking once in office is particularly detrimental when large parts of the electorate perceive the business of politics as broken and have a fundamental lack of trust in its actors and institutions.

Digitally-enabled mobilization can play a role in this education process drawing on new forms of digital democracy and online social activism. Connectivity underpins all relationships within this new political space. Citizens connecting with citizens, civil society organizations with communities and individuals, and politicians and political institutions with the voting public. All these relationships are supported and will continue to be supported to a high degree by technological platforms. Much of this online activity is ad-hoc and focused on

mobilizing immediate responses, rather than providing long-term opportunities for influencing political discourse. Moving from creating “noise” through targeted individual actions towards consistent political momentum over the long term via online activism, and thereby influencing the policymaking process, is clearly a daunting task. But political connectivity adds a new and dynamic angle to policy discussions that can be extremely helpful in narrowing the gap between citizens and the policy process.

In the digital space, complex political issues must be made more palatable and communicable for easier online exchange. That is as much an opportunity as it is a risk, as the very success of populist mobilizations in this space demonstrates. But the use of social media can also make the political process more transparent and create closer, more direct links between political figures and the wider public – provided that the tools are used well and are grounded in a broad strategy that links online activity with offline political momentum. Furthermore, given the limitless opportunities to connect with others, its use enables a wider dialogue for engagement, discouraging isolated and less transparent policy actions. Online mobilization also enables localized groups to expand their reach and become effective amplifiers for citizen engagement. What is important is that these various initiatives are tied together through a unifying narrative.

An overarching narrative that succeeds in reviving political mobilization behind pragmatic programs needs to offer a compelling vision for the future. It needs to contain answers to the big questions regarding “what is wrong, what can be done, and how individuals can get involved.” The appeal of populist forces is that they often provide an effective narrative around questions related to a sense of identity and affiliation. This is clear in the anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric, through which populist parties connect the idea of being ‘anti-something’ with a political identity that is defined by them. It is crucial to develop a stronger connection between being ‘for something’ and a similarly strong sense of affiliation that populists use to spur mobilization. In other words, recreating the ability to act through political mobilization and citizen participation requires a strong focus on crafting and communicating such an overarching narrative - a vision that unites citizens and civil society organizations.

As such, we can identify five ingredients that are necessary for a successful strategy for reviving democratic mobilization in the face of an increasingly powerful populist political agenda in Europe:

1. **Focus on clearly articulating the problems in their entirety, not just on isolated parts of the problem, or their symptoms.** Clarity about the political choices we face and the consequences of various political programs is essential for an effective policy process. If mobilization has disappeared from the political mainstream, it is also because of a lack of substantive policy discussions that engage and educate a large set of the electorate.
2. **Do not offer space to distorted representations of political problems. Attack populist arguments on the substance of their claims.** Pandering to what is often presented as the “legitimate concerns of the public” without a clear educational mission often serves as a dangerous legitimization of populist political agendas. So too is the refusal to engage in political discussions about these agendas. Political mobilization needs to be a two-way street where political ideas shape public opinion as much as they gain traction from popular support.
3. **Provide a vision for a better society that people can identify with, one that is based on a clear understanding of the key issues in society.** The binding power that populists generate by offering a defensive posture against an outside target needs to be challenged by a progressive and forward-looking vision of the good life. A stronger emphasis on the core European values that are enshrined in its treaties needs to be part of a vision that creates positive momentum for policies rather than exacerbating popular anxieties.
4. **Use a wide range of voices as amplifiers and put mobilization back into the center of the policy process.** The multiplication of communication and interaction channels that have enabled new forms of mass mobilization need to be used to create proactive momentum within the political mainstream rather than creating a gap for the fringes to fill. This includes an effective use of both traditional and new media channels to make voices heard across society and to amplify their reach.

5. **Do not backtrack on declared objectives. Follow through with realistic, achievable targets and create a sense of achievement.** Consistency in the implementation of policies and reducing the gap between rhetoric and political actions is key to building trust among a broad set of the electorate and fighting the kind of cynicism about the political process that can so easily be exploited by populists.

These steps will not make the challenge of populism disappear. They will also not fix the underlying policy challenges. They will, however, help to rebuild the foundations for a strong forward-looking vision of political progress within the political mainstream. In the EU in particular this vision needs to connect with a strong narrative about European integration and the values that are connected to this process. While often the very source of contestation, championing the supranational character of these values could and should become a source of strength rather than a liability. Focusing on a pan-European political space significantly widens the playing field in which political actors can fight for the capacity to act, rallying a wide range of local initiatives behind a common political agenda to counter populist mobilization.

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