REPORT - VOTING FOR FAR-RIGHT AND RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES: SPATIAL PERSPECTIVES

VILLA VIGONI/MENAGGIO, 19–21 JUNE 2025

Setting the Framework – The European Panorama

In recent years, populist parties have gained substantial traction across Europe. In one-third of EU countries, these parties now rank among the top three political forces. This trend is no longer considered a temporary deviation but rather a structural transformation in the political landscape. Populist actors have established solid electoral bases and are increasingly embedded in national institutions. This evolution is driven by four interrelated dynamics.

First, there is a clear correlation between fiscal austerity and the rise of populist parties. Traditional parties—from both the left and right—have lost credibility, particularly because they are associated with austerity policies implemented during economic crises. Their capacity to explain and justify these decisions has diminished, leaving space for alternative political narratives.

Second, multidimensional peripherality plays a decisive role. Not just economic marginality, but also cultural, infrastructural, and social peripherality contribute to the appeal of populist platforms. Territories that are stagnating—cut off from development dynamics and from the centers of opportunity—tend to produce protest voting behaviors. Mobility and the unequal distribution of resources concentrate growth and investment in already attractive urban centers, further exacerbating the marginalization of peripheral areas.

Third, migration remains one of the most contentious and defining issues. Both actual immigration levels and perceptions of migration have significant influence on electoral preferences. Fears related to cultural transformation, economic competition, and personal security are often expressed through support for anti-immigration parties. For progressives, this represents both a rhetorical and policy challenge.

Fourth, changes in the media ecosystem—particularly the rise of social media—have transformed the way political messages are produced and received. Populist leaders have effectively bypassed traditional media "gatekeepers," communicating directly with their base. This allows them to present simplified or revisionist narratives, often infused with disinformation or emotional appeals, further destabilizing the traditional political consensus.

In response, the promotion of "social prosperity" is seen as the clearest antidote. This includes redistributive policies, investment in neglected areas, and rebuilding trust between citizens and institutions. Crucially, there is a need to move from people-based to place-based policies—bringing opportunities to where people live, rather than expecting people to relocate in pursuit of them.

The deterioration of living standards and social cohesion has eroded faith in the parties perceived as architects of an unequal globalized system. However, this does not signal a return to fascism. While rhetoric can be extreme, most voters are not driven by a desire to endorse authoritarian ideologies, but rather by a search for answers to urgent, concrete problems. The new populist language distances itself from explicitly fascist framing while still channeling frustration and alienation.

Rebuilding electoral support does not require adopting the most reactionary demands, but rather rethinking how progressive values and proposals are communicated. The divide is often not just about policies, but about the distance between the worldview of political elites and that of the electorate. When issues such as gender equality or "woke" discourse are perceived as disconnected from everyday concerns, they risk alienating rather than engaging.

Place-based policies offer promising ground, but they raise questions about governance and political will. Their effective implementation requires stronger, more coordinated action—possibly even "more Europe." However, this is itself politically contentious. Far-right voting behavior is not always rooted in rational assessments of material conditions, but often emerges from diffuse anxieties and perceptions. Progressives face the challenge of aligning their understanding of "progress" and of framing responses that are cohesive, concrete, and capable of restoring trust across deeply divided societies.

Session 1: socioeconomic inequalities in Italy

The first session focused on the territorial and social inequalities that shape voting behavior in Italy, particularly the rise in support for right-wing populist parties. It was emphasized that the best-performing regions in Italy remain concentrated in the North, especially around metropolitan areas. However, the internal and more rural areas continue to face deep structural challenges, ranging from a lack of economic opportunity to the chronic absence of essential welfare services. These disparities are not fixed in time: territorial inequalities evolve, often in correlation with mobility dynamics. Territories that manage to attract resources and investment continue to do so, reinforcing their advantage, while others remain stuck in patterns of stagnation and decline. This dynamic has created a geography of opportunity that increasingly excludes certain areas and populations.

In these internal and disadvantaged regions, the absence of welfare services creates a de facto division between first-class and second-class citizens. This divide fuels disillusionment with mainstream political options and pushes voters toward populist alternatives, often on the right. There is a strong correlation between these missing services and right-wing populist voting behavior, which suggests that improving local socio-economic and infrastructural conditions could alter the political trajectory of these areas. At the same time, it's crucial to understand that this dynamic is not purely material. The role of perception—how people understand and interpret their relative position—is central. In the French case, it was observed that low levels of *perceived* inequality correspond to low far-right support, whereas high levels of objective poverty and economic decline correlate more consistently with right-wing populist voting. The feeling of being left behind is not always a reflection of statistical realities, but often stems from lived experiences of marginalization and a perceived loss of status or control.

The urban-rural divide plays a significant role here. Rural voters often exhibit higher levels of support for the far right, and this divide appears to intersect with other dimensions of exclusion, including gender and education. Interestingly, indicators like car dependency were cited as proxies for distance from services and centers of power, correlating strongly with far-right preferences. However, the analysis went beyond simple dichotomies. Urban areas themselves are not immune to these dynamics. Even within cities, particularly in poorer neighborhoods where residents may feel they are in competition—real or perceived—with migrants for limited public resources, support for the far right can be significant. This complexity underscores the importance of moving beyond broad regional categories and considering local socioeconomic structures and patterns of exclusion.

An important challenge lies in how we define the far right itself. Many parties engaged in this political space have actively sought to normalize their discourse, blending more radical elements with moderate positions in order to attract disaffected centrist voters. This strategic repositioning makes it more difficult to identify clear ideological boundaries and complicates the task of understanding voter motivations. Rather than focusing exclusively on ideological labels, it may be more productive to examine how these parties respond to perceived grievances and gaps left by traditional political formations.

Education was identified as one of the most significant factors influencing voting behavior. In general, higher levels of education are associated with more nuanced perceptions of social and economic inequality, and lower support for extreme parties. Yet the picture is far from simple. Education alone is insufficient if it is not accompanied by meaningful improvements in the quality of life and service provision. In rural areas where welfare is lacking, even educated citizens may feel alienated and opt for populist alternatives. Education, in other words, can improve perceptions, but cannot compensate for material exclusion.

Ultimately, a core issue for progressive and left-leaning forces is the growing distance between the demands of the electorate—especially in disadvantaged areas—and the responses they offer. The problem is not merely the rise of the far right, but the erosion of the left's ability to provide answers that resonate. This is both a strategic and a substantive challenge. Voters are not necessarily opposed to the values traditionally upheld by the left, but may no longer recognize those values—or their practical relevance—in the current political discourse. Rebuilding this connection requires not just a redistribution of material resources, but a recalibration of language, priorities, and engagement strategies that can speak more directly to the lived experiences of those who feel left behind.

Session 2 – Antisystem Parties and Multidimensional Peripherality

The divide between political centers and peripheral areas is not only a feature of economic disparities but deeply embedded in the way societies perceive identity, governance, and agency. Across various European countries, anti-system sentiments have found fertile ground in geographically or symbolically peripheral regions—whether rural zones, post-industrial areas, or communities that feel culturally or institutionally excluded.

The case of Norway offers insight into how center-periphery tensions manifest even in high-income and relatively equal societies. Opposition to EU membership in Norway was not solely based on economic concerns but rather on identity and sovereignty, particularly in rural regions. Historical experiences of being part of alliances in which Norway was a leader have shaped a reluctance to "submit" to perceived supranational control. The urban-rural divide in this context is not strictly tied to poverty or low levels of education, but to broader perceptions of autonomy, safety, and national cohesion.

In Poland, disparities between eastern and western regions are rooted in both historical legacies and geographic distance from the economic core of Europe. The country has experienced a shift from a highly fragmented party system to a polarized dynamic between liberal, pro-European parties and populist, Eurosceptic formations with a strong focus on social protection. The ability of political actors to mobilize peripheral voters is closely linked to their effectiveness in addressing perceived inefficiencies in public services and governance. Polarization is reinforced by the interaction of spatial and economic inequalities, layered with powerful subjective perceptions.

Romania presents a particularly stark example of how rapid economic growth can coexist with rising political disaffection. Although now classified as a high-income country, it has witnessed a steep rise in far-right support within a few years. The divide is not limited to urban versus rural zones; even within regions, disparities in access to services and quality of life are widening. Economic growth has often intensified inequality rather than alleviating it. As a result, dissatisfaction and disillusionment have spread, partly fueled by disinformation and a lack of accurate, accessible information on public policy and economic realities. Fighting misinformation must therefore be a core part of addressing the root causes of radicalization.

Germany's experience highlights the role of long-standing and more recent regional divides. The east-west gap continues to define much of the political landscape, with shrinking and aging regions particularly vulnerable to far-right narratives. These areas share structural traits: weaker social infrastructure, limited access to digital services, and a perception of being forgotten by national politics. Subjective feelings of exclusion and insecurity frequently amplify material disparities. This has contributed to the success of the far-right, particularly in eastern regions where reunification did not bring the expected prosperity.

Across all these national contexts, a recurring theme is that economic and territorial inequalities feed into political estrangement. However, a purely economic analysis is insufficient. What matters is how people perceive their conditions, how political actors interpret and channel those perceptions, and what visions of the future are offered. Subjective narratives, cultural identity, and trust in institutions play a defining role.

Several strategies were identified to address the growing divide: make regional inequalities visible and central to policy discourse; shift from reactive, short-term solutions to long-term structural investments; strengthen local administrative and governance capacity; create realistic and attractive prospects for the future through innovation, decent jobs, and infrastructure; and rebuild trust through more effective communication, education, and community engagement.

Despite years of awareness, not enough has been done to reverse these trends. The increasing divergence across regions and social groups continues to fuel anti-system sentiments. A new political strategy is needed—one that takes territorial fragmentation seriously and connects socio-economic policy to a renewed democratic and participatory vision of Europe.

Session 3 – Populism and Austerity

The rise of populism in Europe cannot be explained solely through a narrative of economic stagnation or poverty. More than the mere loss of wealth, what appears to be a primary driver is the *sudden* loss of social status and the widespread perception of betrayal by political elites. This rupture of trust has deep psychological and political consequences and often follows episodes of rapid structural change imposed from above—such as the fiscal austerity measures implemented during and after the financial and sovereign debt crises.

Austerity was initially justified as a necessary step to restore fiscal discipline, particularly in those member states perceived as economically unstable or overly indebted. The goal was to lay the groundwork for long-term responsible governance. However, the application of these measures—harsh and often poorly timed—triggered deep social and institutional disruptions. They constrained the ability of national governments to maintain welfare programs and social investments, precisely at a time when citizens were most in need of public reassurance. What followed was not just an

economic downturn but a wider delegitimization of democratic institutions, seen as either powerless or complicit.

The aftermath of austerity coincided with other large-scale systemic shocks, most notably the migration crisis. This convergence of material insecurity and cultural anxiety created an ideal climate for the flourishing of populist narratives, often framed around protection, sovereignty, and exclusion. Populism gained traction not necessarily because of persistent poverty but due to the accumulation of unmet expectations, combined with a sense of being left behind or unfairly targeted.

The discussion challenged the adequacy of common indicators of inequality—particularly those based narrowly on income. Financial hardship, precarious access to services, insecurity in housing, and deteriorating public infrastructure offer a more accurate portrait of the crisis experienced by many European citizens. Inequality, in this sense, is not just about the gap between high and low incomes, but about the unequal distribution of welfare provisions, public goods, and the subjective sense of security.

Economics, in this framing, is not a neutral or "hard" science—it is inherently political. The design and implementation of fiscal policy must be evaluated not only for economic sustainability but for its democratic and social consequences. Austerity, when applied without political foresight or social compensation, deepens the fractures between citizens and institutions and leaves fertile ground for anti-system movements.

Understanding the sources of dissatisfaction means reframing how inequalities are measured, perceived, and addressed. The challenge ahead lies in finding an equilibrium between fiscal responsibility and social cohesion, while re-legitimizing public action in the eyes of those who feel abandoned.

Session 4 – Immigration and Perceptions

Migration must be understood not as a temporary emergency but as a permanent feature of the contemporary world. It ebbs and flows in response to a range of economic, geopolitical, and environmental factors, yet establishing clear causal links remains elusive. Rather than focusing solely on regulation, what is needed is an approach that balances effective management with the real concerns of local communities—while also reaffirming European values.

From a demographic and economic standpoint, immigration is often presented as a solution to the labor shortages and aging populations common to industrialized countries. However, this utilitarian argument tends to neglect or underestimate the psychological and cultural dimension of the phenomenon—particularly the fear of difference. Societies and states are not always prepared, practically or politically, to integrate large numbers of newcomers who may appear radically different in terms of culture, language, and religion.

Importantly, there is little correlation between actual migration flows and the migration policies implemented. Anti-immigration discourses, despite variations across national contexts, tend to reproduce a common ideological structure. They assert that Europe holds no responsibility toward migrants, that migrants should be grateful for being hosted, and that long stays do not automatically guarantee rights or citizenship. In this logic, migrants are expected to conform fully to unspecified norms of behavior, and failure to do so justifies expulsion or exclusion. These positions sustain a

hierarchical vision of society, rooted in colonial, discriminatory, and racist assumptions—where migrants are confined to second- or third-tier status.

In contrast, a progressive narrative on migration must be built on principles of dignity, solidarity, and shared future. Several policy proposals were advanced to support this reorientation. These include expanding refugee resettlement programs, enhancing initiatives such as the EU Talent Passport, and combating structural racism and discrimination within the European Union. A critical step is also the acknowledgment of Europe's colonial past and the current asymmetries in its relationships with departure and transit countries. This must be accompanied by a redefinition of citizenship—no longer based on ethnicity or origin but on shared values and equal participation.

There is a crucial distinction to be made between addressing migration and addressing racism. Conflating the two issues can lead to political paralysis or alienation of certain voter groups. A more effective approach involves addressing material concerns and the emotional dimensions of insecurity without capitulating to xenophobic rhetoric. Policies need to be articulated in ways that resonate with the everyday experiences of citizens, while maintaining moral clarity and political courage.

Labor unions often support legal migration, recognizing it as a way to expand their membership base and reinforce protections for all workers. Nonetheless, a dual logic persists within European societies: while there is public rhetoric about controlling migration, many sectors continue to rely on the exploitation of migrant labor under poor conditions. This hypocrisy must be challenged.

Ultimately, the goal should be to build a Europe that shares a common future with migrants—a Europe that becomes a true home for all, grounded in justice, equality, and mutual respect.

Session 5 – Populism and the Role of Old and New Media

The current media landscape plays a central role in shaping contemporary populism. Social media platforms, driven by algorithms designed to maximize engagement, systematically prioritize polarizing content over neutral or informative material. Rather than fostering informed debate, these platforms tend to amplify emotionally charged narratives, reinforcing echo chambers and filter bubbles that insulate users from opposing viewpoints and fact-based discourse. This environment encourages the spread of misinformation and deepens existing societal divisions.

The rise of surveillance capitalism has transformed user behavior into a commodity. Individuals, in pursuit of visibility and recognition, curate their identities online and willingly expose their thoughts, preferences, and actions to digital platforms. This dynamic has fundamentally altered the logic of control: surveillance is no longer externally imposed but self-performed. The boundaries between public and private have been eroded, with individuals participating in their own monitoring—often without fully realizing the implications.

In this context, social media becomes a powerful tool for reversing and reframing truth, not by presenting outright fabrications but by manipulating narratives in ways that resonate with the pre-existing biases of the electorate. The effectiveness of a message is no longer rooted in its factual accuracy, but in how intuitively it fits into the worldview of its audience. In such a media environment, facts are subordinated to affective and ideological resonance.

A key concern is the absence of a shared public interest, traditionally supported by public service broadcasting. While legacy media can still play a role, it is no longer feasible to return to a previous

media regime. Instead, there is a need to engage with the digital sphere using its own tools—critically but constructively. Media literacy, critical engagement, and the creation of content that respects democratic values while being digitally effective are essential.

Special attention must also be paid to gender polarization online. The digital spaces inhabited by younger generations often reflect fragmented realities, with boys and girls growing up in parallel ecosystems of information and influence. This division risks reinforcing deeply entrenched stereotypes and creating divergent social experiences that complicate democratic cohesion.

Despite these challenges, a healthy digital culture is not a utopian dream. The history of internet regulation shows that while difficult, it is possible to set norms and boundaries that protect public discourse. Building on this experience, there is a pressing need for coordinated efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and digital citizenship as pillars of democratic resilience.

Session 6 – Political Comment: What Is the Social Democratic Agenda in Respect of the Current Situation?

The appeal of the far right lies not just in emotional rhetoric, but in the clarity and coherence of the narratives they offer around well-identified problems. Their success is rooted in the experience of inequality—economic, social, and territorial—exacerbated by globalization processes that have produced a small number of winners and a vast number of people left behind. This widening divide has fuelled resentment, with a widespread sense that political elites have betrayed citizens' trust by imposing economic transformations without popular mandate or regard for their consequences.

The far right's rise is less a failure of democratic values than it is a failure of democratic structures. Social democracy should not position itself merely in reaction to this dynamic; it must reclaim its role as a proactive generator of ideas, values, and political identities that speak to people's concrete conditions. Political economy must refocus on the basic task of inclusive growth and sustainable development.

At the core of the social democratic response is a political economy built around alliances with the public sector and trade unions. The public sector remains key for institutional competitiveness—especially through investment in education—while labor and union alliances are essential to ensure work remains a source of dignity and competitive advantage. A "distribution lens" should guide public policy, prioritizing how benefits and burdens are shared across society.

A reimagined model of the state is needed—one that combines welfare provision with regulatory power and entrepreneurial vision. This includes proactive interventions in the production phase and the deployment of sovereign wealth funds. It is not a question of choosing less or more state; more is not only better but necessary in this context.

To address today's challenges, both persona-based and place-based policies must be deployed. Persona-based approaches target specific social categories through tailored income and social policies. Place-based approaches focus on geographic inequalities, identifying where intervention is most needed. The silence and political abandonment experienced by those left behind must be addressed systematically.

New dilemmas emerge around externalities, commitment, and coordination failures. Job quality and productivity are under strain from AI-driven change and global economic fragmentation. Technological disruption risks accelerating divergence if not matched by deliberate policy efforts.

At the European level, a comprehensive social democratic action plan is required—one that confronts monopolistic practices in tech, halts the race to the bottom in tax competition, and shifts the fiscal burden away from labor and toward capital. This involves better data collection through regular surveys on income, wealth, consumption, labor force dynamics, and—critically—on citizens' expectations and attitudes towards economic policy.

An essential toolkit should include evidence-based policy design and targeted public measures that speak to well-defined constituencies. The economic agenda must be driven by a clear understanding of whom it is helping, and how.

A contrasting view on identity politics was presented through a case study of Malmö, which suggested that the way forward is not to reinforce separate identities, but to foster shared local belonging. Rather than minoritizing social groups, progressive politics should aim to integrate everyone into a common civic identity rooted in locality. Democracy is not limited to the ballot box—there are multiple avenues through which people can participate and re-engage.

Far-right forces exploit the growing gap between citizens and institutions. In this context, local politics is not just a testing ground, but a vital arena where progressives can reconnect with citizens. While national elections often expose social democrats to abstract and polarizing debates—on migration, for instance—local elections tend to be more pragmatic. Promises must align with real capabilities, and the impact of policy can be directly observed. This proximity makes misinformation less effective and policy outcomes more tangible.

Progressive actors have shown greater resilience at the local level, in some cases achieving notable successes. This underlines a key strategic lesson: to reconnect with people, social democracy must embrace the local dimension, prioritizing visible, concrete interventions that improve daily life. Local governance offers a chance to build trust, address inequality, and prove that democracy can still deliver.