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## Populism Is the Opium of the People

By Matt A. Mayer

The [Italian elections this month](#) produced a clear winner: [populism](#). The two populist parties, the Five Star Movement and the League, garnered just a hair more than half of the vote. Even though the League has said it likely wouldn't form a coalition government with the Five Star Movement, (and vice-versa) the power of populist, Eurosceptic parties will create problems within the European Union.

This stunning result comes on the heels of the [elections in Germany back in September](#), which resulted in the lack of a government until last week. In [Germany](#), the populist, Eurosceptic party, Alternative for Germany, received nearly 13 percent of the vote, gaining seats in the Bundestag. That achievement shook the political establishment in Germany, as it will be the first time since World War II that a party from the fringe held seats in parliament.

Six months earlier in March 2017, [populist firebrand Geert Wilders led his Party for Freedom](#) (PVV), along with the new party, the Forum for Democracy (FvD) led by Thierry Baudet, to gaining seven seats in the Dutch parliament. Though pre-election surveys showed the PVV doing much better than it did, the fact that PVV and FvD gained seats indicates a continuing upward trend for populism and Euroscepticism in the Netherlands.

Of course, in the [U.S.](#) in November 2016, populist, non-politician [Donald Trump](#) shocked many by defeating Hillary Clinton for the presidency. Trump's platform wove between traditional Republican positions on taxes, regulations, and immigration and typical Democratic positions on trade and labor. He won several states that hadn't voted for a Republican presidential candidate since the 1980s because he picked up blue-collar Democrats who had twice voted for Barack Obama.

This populist wave, however, started well before Trump. You could see the wave building back in 2014 when the United Kingdom Independent Party secured the largest vote total in the European Parliament elections and again in June of 2016 when voters in the United Kingdom opted to leave the European Union with 52 percent of the vote. I conducted a fact-finding mission in April 2014 when I met with political leaders in London, Paris, Amsterdam and The Hague. Our group heard time and again [that populism and Euroscepticism was rising rapidly](#) due to the Great Recession in 2008 that had a major negative impact on older Europeans.

Two years later, on a counterterrorism fact-finding trip that took me to the [U.K.](#), [France](#), Belgium, [the Netherlands](#) and Germany, we heard unequivocally that citizens were angry and

fearful about the [mass immigration of migrants](#) from North Africa and the Middle East. Many of the elections across Europe since the arrival of those immigrants have focused on the impact of those individuals on European culture and security, with the sentiment largely coming out against the "German" policy as stated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

With elections coming up in [Hungary](#), [Slovenia](#), [Sweden](#) and the U.S. in 2018, as well as in [Denmark](#), [Finland](#), [Greece](#), [Poland](#), and the next round of European Parliamentary elections in 2019, we will see if this populist wave will continue to build or lose some of its potency. Given the uncertainty globally due to changing policies by the U.S. on trade and tariffs, the expected increase in mass migration from North Africa and the Middle East into Europe, the possible pitfalls accompanying efforts to solve North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the likelihood of a U.S. withdrawal from the Iran Agreement, and the responses to Russia's stunning alleged chemical weapon attack in the UK..., the economies of the West could see large levels of volatility and fall into the cyclical recession that is long overdue.

The simple reality is that only continued economic growth and increased prosperity are likely to slow or stop the rise of populism in the West. If, as some experts predict, the next recession is more severe than the Great Recession of 2008, populism will not just rise, it will explode in a manner few can predict and even fewer can control.

Karl Marx said religion was the opium of the people, back in 1844. Today, however, the opium of the masses is populism, and more people appear to be addicted to it with each passing year.

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