



# REPORT



## “After Their Establishment: Right-wing Populist Parties in Europe”

Book Launch by Dr. Florian Hartleb

Organized by the Centre for European Studies and the  
European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Wednesday, 5 October, 17 h

In his welcome, the President of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, **Dr. Hans-Gert Pöttering**, highlighted the recent successes of right-wing populist parties in Scandinavia as well as their good performance in polls of other countries, like Austria. He further raised the question whether Europe's debt crisis could further strengthen right-wing populist parties. Dr. Pöttering made clear that the very different electoral success of right-wing populist parties in the EU member states necessitated different answers.

In his introductory statement, **Wilfried Martens** (President of the European People's Party / President of the Centre for European Studies), outlined the main topics right-wing populist parties were aiming at: immigration, sovereignty and European integration. Populism had become a main feature of politics not only in Europe, but also in Latin America. In recent years, populist movements have been present in politics in Europe, often either joining or at least supporting governments. One of the reasons for their success was the increasing division and fragmentation of society.

They were portraying themselves as advocates of “the common man in the street” and as fearless taboo- breakers. Usually, these movements were lead by a charismatic leader. However, right-wing populist parties had no real answer to globalisation processes.

At the same time, the word “populist” had become an instrument for the political left against centre-right parties.

Martens further distinguished between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism. He also highlighted the emergence of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe.

The EPP should address hot topics and make clear that there were no simple solutions for complicated topics. Right wing populist were now addressing to people's fears. Popular parties had therefore to provide visions based on principles and should not negate values which were the basis of the European Union.

Martens underlined the enormous diversity of populist parties; FPÖ and Vlaams Belang were for example not standing for the same issues. There were different ways to handle right-wing populist parties: forming a cordon



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sanitaire or inviting them into government in order to highlight their programmatic weaknesses and inconsistencies. Both options could make sense depending on the situation.

**Dr. Florian Hartleb** (Visiting Fellow, Centre for European Studies) explained the success of populist parties with different factors: Agreeing with Wilfried Martens, he underlined that they were successfully appealing to people's fears. Furthermore they stressed the subjective and emotional aspects of politics. A charismatic undisputed leader at the top of these parties was a key for their success. The lack of democratic party structures was hardly perceived as a disadvantage among voters. Moreover, their anti-elitism and the anti-Islamic rhetoric responded to perceptions of large parts of the population.

Their strong and highly efficient presence in the media was equally playing a crucial role. Populists were portraying themselves as true representatives of the people, based on the wrong assumption of the existence a homogenous people. By depicting clear enemies, they painted a simple, but easily understandable picture of politics.

In order to counter their influence, Dr. Hartleb urged for an offensive approach against popular parties: People parties should highlight the shallow argumentation and the contradictions of populist parties.

In the framework of the discussion, Dr. Hartleb underlined that it was necessary for the centre-right parties to engage in a debate on "hot topics". This included also Euroscepticism: It was necessary to improve the communication of EU successes. Moreover, established parties should use and apply new models of participation. He also highlighted that the main challenge was to focus on the younger generations.

Another issue raised in the debate was the lacking institutionalisation of right-wing populist parties.

Participants also named the increasingly spontaneous nature of voters as a reason for the increasing support for populist parties. Dr. Hartleb underlined that the current economic crisis was not the main danger for people's parties, but rather many people's general fear of globalisation.

A participant underlined the strong differences between right-wing parties, particularly between the CEE countries and Western Europe. They were pursuing different aims and had not enough common ground to create a joint force.

In the framework of the discussion, one participant raised the problem of populist tendencies inside the EPP, particularly naming the Italian PdL: Dr. Hartleb however made clear that there were considerable differences between right-wing populist parties and the PdL. Inter alia, Berlusconi had been assuming government responsibility for several years. The political discourse and the party system in Italy should also be seen in the light of the melt-down of the political landscape in the beginning of the 1990s.

On right-wing populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, Hartleb distinguished between the Visegrad countries on the one hand and Romania and Bulgaria on the other hand where electoral volatility and the instability of the party system were considerably higher than in the first group.