

European Union

Anti-Brussels rhetoric goes mainstream across Europe

As leaders head to Bratislava, the pro-bloc establishment faces an unusually menacing 18 months



Populist surge: mainstream European politicians are increasing their anti-Brussels rhetoric in response to the growing popularity of parties such as the National Front in France, the Five Star Movement in Italy and Austria's Freedom party

SEPTEMBER 16, 2016 by: **Anne-Sylvaine Chassany** in Paris, **Henry Foy** in Warsaw and **Ralph Atkins** in Zurich

EU leaders will gather in Bratislava on Friday to plot ways to reinforce the bloc after the UK's shock vote to leave. Back home, many of their political rivals will be touting campaign proposals with a different aim: to rein in — and even unwind — the postwar project.

With national elections looming in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, the calls for a drastic overhaul of EU institutions are growing louder. Once confined to the populist fringe, they are increasingly emanating from the mainstream.

In France, which holds presidential polls next year, candidates for the centre-right nomination have ramped up their anti-Brussels rhetoric. Leading the charge, former president Nicolas Sarkozy has vowed to secure a new treaty and request the handling of the passport-free Schengen zone be returned to member states.

Alain Juppé, his main rival in the nomination contest, has followed suit by suggesting Brussels be stripped of some of its powers. Meanwhile, on the left Arnaud Montebourg, a former Socialist economy minister seeking to challenge French President François Hollande, has advocated protectionist measures to help French companies, a contradiction of the single market's rules.

“Once again, we’re going to witness lots of bold promises, lots of EU bashing, lots of German bashing in France and in other countries and, in the end, leaders with incompatible mandates will be elected,” Sylvie Goulard, a French centrist MEP, predicted. “It could open the Pandora’s Box.”

Campaign promises to transform Europe are nothing new and often fizzle when a new leader reaches their first EU summit. But for the pro-EU establishment, the next 18 months of elections and referendums are unusually menacing.

A new cast of leaders is poised to emerge just as the political centre ground on Europe is shifting, threatening a consensus that has underpinned the European project for decades.



Nicolas Sarkozy, former French president, has vowed to secure a new EU treaty and request the handling of the passport-free Schengen zone be returned to member states © AFP

The anti-Brussels stance extends beyond France, the eurozone's second-largest economy, to the Netherlands and Austria, where populist forces are gaining strength.

This year, Austria's ruling coalition of the Social Democrat and the People's parties executed a U-turn on their treatment of refugees by securing a deal with neighbouring countries to close the so-called "Balkan route".

They were thrust into action by a resurgent Freedom party, whose candidate came within a whisker in May's presidential elections of becoming Europe's first far-right head-of-state in the postwar era. (A re-run on December 4 may yet see the party succeed).

In southern Europe, the Eurosceptic voices are also growing. Italy's anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which won mayoral seats in Rome and Turin in June, has heaped pressure on Matteo Renzi, the prime minister, who has put his job on the line in a referendum this year over constitutional reform.



Italy's Matteo Renzi: 'I carry the voice of a country that is fed up of receiving lists of things to do' © Getty

"In Italy there is no constructive force that would commit to doing something together in Europe," one senior EU official observed, adding: "The threat of [French far-right leader] Marine Le Pen seems more drastic but I fear there is nothing to the left or right of Renzi to save us from the abyss."

These currents of discontent in national politics are bearing down on Europe's current leadership, already deeply divided over multiple crises.

On Thursday, Mr Renzi fumed at Brussels' repeated challenges to Italian fiscal policies, saying: "At Bratislava and other summits, I carry the voice of a country that is fed up of receiving lists of things to do."

Alexis Tsipras, the Greek prime minister, last week sought to harness such frustration at a mini-summit of southern European leaders he hosted to demand the end of austerity, in an apparent jab at Brussels and a more financially disciplined north.

Further east, governments in Poland and Hungary are demanding nothing less than a "counter revolution" inside the EU, with suggestions that include stripping the commission of some of its prerogatives under a new treaty.

"We may have to talk about the reform of the Lisbon treaty," said Beata Szydlo, the Polish prime minister, before departing for Bratislava. "If the EU is to survive and be safe, it has to be reformed."



Alexis Tsipras of Greece last week demanded the end of austerity at a mini-summit of southern European leaders in an apparent jab at Brussels © AFP

Such rumblings have been made worse by Europe's clumsy response to the financial crisis, according to André Sapir, a senior fellow at Bruegel, a Brussels-based pro-EU think-tank. "Since 2008, the member states have handled crises and taken initiatives — not the commission. The perception is that Brussels was not in charge," he said.

For all the campaign bluster, though, demands for a grand overhaul of the institutions have little chance of materialising, according to **Pascal** Lamy, who headed the cabinet of Jacques Delors, the European Commission president who presided over a golden era of EU integration. Not least, he noted, 27 remaining EU members — with a diverse set of complaints — would have to reach unanimity about what changes to make.

“Sarkozy’s new treaty is like Donald Trump’s Mexican wall: it’s not going to happen overnight,” Mr Lamy said.

But even if the bloc manages to contain the populist onslaught, growing Euroscepticism threatens to cripple the EU’s inner workings by placing national governments — instead of the commission — at the heart of the machine. Such a shift, warns, Charles Grant, founder of the Centre for European Reform, could put divisive topics, such as deeper eurozone integration, on hold “for decades” while undermining Brussels’ authority in the meantime.

“The question is: do we have a majority who believe that doing things together is better than being on our own?” Mr Lamy said. In Bratislava, EU leaders will try to respond.

Additional reporting by James Politi in Rome

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