Strasbourg, 16 April 2014

POSITION PAPER
ON THE RISE OF RIGHT WING EXTREMISM AND POPULISM
IN EUROPE

Europe's values are under threat. They are being challenged by the rise of ideologies of intolerance, racism, xenophobia, violence and by narratives that go against the very core principles on which the European Union is founded. Speeches of hatred that would have been inconceivable a few years ago are gaining in popularity, becoming more uninhibited, and to an extent acceptable in the political debate. More subtle forms of intolerance influence the actions of governments in several Member States and it is by now common to see populist and extremist rhetoric openly expressed.

OUR WORK

Having set up a *working group on extremism, populism, and xenophobia in the European Union,* our Group has been monitoring and promptly reacting to any event or activity that went against the principles of a free and inclusive Europe. **In 2010, the S&D Group adopted a policy document that proposed a set of actions for the current mandate. As we reach the end of the legislature, we have made great progress towards our objectives, having:**

- monitored closely the state of play regarding extremist movements, as well as good practices regarding integration, both at European level and in the Member States. **We carried out fact finding missions,** including ones to the UK, Greece, Belgium, France and Romania. We have also **drawn up or commissioned reports** that provide a more in-depth analysis, including a comprehensive report that gives a thorough overview of the state of democracy in Europe, published by the independent think tank Demos,

- constantly flagged up developments that put into question the fundamental principles of the EU, working with our social and political partners to ensure that fundamental rights and freedoms are respected. We have regularly **organised conferences and debates with civil society, journalists, experts and representatives of different communities.** These events have included: "An Open Society for All; Media Freedom and Democracy under Threat"; "Media Freedom under Threat: National Problems, European Solutions?"; "The Influence of the Extreme Right on Mainstream Politics"; "Social Integration - the Key to a Fair and Open Economy";

and "More Openness, More Democracy - The Response to the Oslo and Utøya Attacks"
- proposed and worked to develop concrete policies to create a stronger social Europe, promoting and supporting initiatives aimed at addressing discrimination, hate crimes and extremism. **We initiated and supported resolutions** (such as those on *Discriminatory internet sites and government reactions* in 2012; *Strengthening the fight against racism, xenophobia and hate crime*; and the *Progress made in the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies* in 2013), **reports** (such as those on the *Regulation establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund*; the *Situation of fundamental rights in the EU*; and on the *EU Justice Scoreboard*), **debates in the plenary of the European Parliament** (such as those on the *Rise of right wing extremism in Europe*, and on the *Situation of the Roma people in the EU* in 2013); as well as **calling the European Commission and Council of the EU to account** (for example by the Oral Question on the *Situation of Roma in Member States* in 2012)

WHAT WE SEE TODAY

Europe under stress

Europe is going through a period of stress and a **prolonged crisis that manifests itself on an economic, social, political level, as well as at the level of personal and national identity.** The economic crisis in itself does not determine the rise of extremism, but the factors deriving from it play a crucial part, as European citizens have to face **increasing poverty, unemployment and imposed austerity.** These can impact on citizens' way of life and create a **fear of losing their social-economic status quo.** One of the main issues on which populist and extremist parties base their rhetoric throughout Member States is the supposed threat that migration and minorities represent to their national societies, **migrants and minorities being used as scapegoats** for most of the difficulties that citizens are going through. It is the conjuncture of these factors that has led to a **loss of trust in the established system and traditional parties,** providing a breeding ground for angry anti-establishment rhetoric.

The rise of right wing extremist and populist parties and movements

We have observed a growing trend in the popularity of right wing populist, anti-establishment and extremist parties and movements. Although they may demonstrate different degrees of aggressiveness (some of them presenting themselves with "new clothes", focusing on social themes and seeking to de-demonise their parties, on the margins of respectability), **these parties share many similarities and focus on the same issues in their narrative.** Tolerance towards extremist violence begins from the acceptance of extremist ideologies and ideas, develops as a generalised justification of illegal acts, and ultimately can turn into an attack against social cohesion and democracy.

Rhetoric of intolerance, aggressiveness and hate

Far right populists and extremists try to present themselves as the real representatives of the people, voicing the problems that citizens face and expressing their dissatisfaction with the current state of play. They adopt a very simplistic narrative, stating the obvious in an emotional way, rebelling against all the difficulties the society is going through and in return bringing forward only proposals that are clearly unfeasible and even damaging.

Issues such as **the economic crisis, migration, globalisation and ultimately the idea of a united Europe are used, misused and misrepresented irresponsibly, with the sole purpose of gaining more popularity.** Populist parties focus on immigration in their rhetoric, highlighting it as a burden or even as an invasion, and making random connections between immigration and the consequences of the economic crisis.

Very worryingly, **hate speech has infiltrated the political and social debate in Europe,** stretching the limits of acceptability of expressions of hatred to very high levels, fuelling a climate of suspicion, aggressiveness and, ultimately, crime. We have reached a stage where dissimulation is no longer necessary and xenophobic, discriminatory and even racist ideas can be expressed freely and without being reprehended.

Another worrying aspect is that in some member states extremist, anti-LGBTI, nationalist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and anti-Roma declarations from the far-right are becoming more and more frequent and without being challenged by mainstream parties and politicians.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

Reveal the reality behind populist and extremist speech

What is the Europe that populists and extremists promote? How would our lives be if we followed their scenarios of intolerance and xenophobia? We need to **show where populist and extremist proposals would actually lead to** and have a **strong voice against any discourse promoting discrimination, aggression or hate.** We need to counter their narrative point by point, giving fact based arguments against every misleading idea, every wrong fact and wrong number; and every destructive proposal that they make. Populists and extremists distort reality to better suit their ideas and most of the times have no basis for their affirmations, other than emotional ones. As socialists and democrats, **we can provide facts, figures and constructive proposals for the future,** and they should be brought forward every time we face populist speeches.

To the growing trend of mainstream parties adopting a populist discourse, we also need to respond by emphasising the benefits of our progressive vision. **We must not give in to populism, but react against it, expose it, and counter it with tangible proposals and an honest approach.**

We should engage in raising awareness and launching information campaigns to reveal the true face of populism and extremism.

Populists fight against the European Union, while at the same time benefiting from European funds, both as Members of the European Parliament and as European parties and foundations. **While making vindictive speeches in plenary** that then go viral, in order to show their electorate how active they are, **they do not attend committee meetings and do no work in the proceedings of the European Parliament.** Declaring without any basis in fact that there will be invasions of populations from one Member State to another; that a whole ethnic group is made of criminals and should be expelled from Europe; that whole religions are violent; that acts of terror committed by far right lone wolves could have a justification; racially insulting officials of Member States - all these are forms of hate-speech that incite to violence, that go beyond freedom of expression and deserve prompt reactions.

Extremism represents a dangerous phenomenon, being a **manifestation of hatred and aggression** and people should be made aware that by supporting or tacitly accepting extremism, they are supporting violence. And once it gains power and legitimacy, violence can become less controllable by legal or political means. Whilst isolating the violent extremists, we should try to engage in comprehensive debates with the supporters of populist or radical parties and movements, providing them with alternatives.

The fight against extremism and populism should be seen as a shared responsibility of all of European society, endorsed by all politicians, the education system, the media and the civil society, as a matter of protecting our democratic society and the values we all share, irrespective of our political affiliation.

Promote real alternatives for the future and campaigning for common values

Our vision for the future of Europe and its Member States encompasses a set of proposals for solving the problems that Europe and its citizens now face and reinforcing the trust of people in the EU:

- have a sustainable approach to migration and asylum, promoting integration, citizenship and the implementation of a common asylum policy, showing respect for human rights and solidarity between Member States
- continue to stand for the free movement of citizens and workers, seeing it as a free choice and not a forced option due to poverty or as an instrument to abuse social systems
- fight for high social and labour standards for all workers and combat social dumping, having a thorough revision of the Directive on posted workers
- put employment and economic growth, instead of austerity measures and cuts, at the heart of the economic policy
- promote the European Youth Guarantee to ensure good-quality jobs for young people
- combat poverty and build a more socially fair Europe, balancing economic and social objectives
- make the decision-making process at EU level more democratic and open to public debate and consultation
- create a new and more industry-friendly economic policy, with support for a cross-sector re-industrialisation and reshaping of the financial sector to finance the real economy
- promote gender equality and reduce the gender pay gap
- continuously promote equality and combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation

Providing solutions for the economic, financial and social crisis is our number one priority. **Mainstream forces across the political spectrum need to respond and address the concerns of the European citizens.** We need to **tackle** the issues of **unemployment, austerity, poverty, immigration and defining a cultural identity without turning to xenophobic rhetoric and false answers.** Engaging in debate with the citizens and offering tangible solutions, we will deal with extremism and populism by removing their rebellious and anti-system mask.

We want to **revive the European Idea and regain the confidence of people** and their enthusiasm for the European Project, and remind them why the EU was created and what it stands for: peace, freedom, modernity and unity in diversity.

We want to promote an **inclusive Europe, where integration is seen as a joint and respectful endeavour for living together and benefiting from diversity.** We must try at all levels, including at the local level, to engage in more debates with people of different backgrounds and origins, providing the common ground to talk to each other and learn about their shared values.

We need to **tackle xenophobia and social violence through positive campaigning, with the active involvement of civil society, victims' groups and institutions for social protection and cohesion.** We must establish projects to inform and train students about European democratic values and to develop their critical thinking. It is through the educational system, sports, the internet, social media and the mass media that we can reach the people, and especially the young.

Strengthen our democratic tools

Our democratic society possesses a wide set of democratic tools and institutions that can be used to monitor, evaluate and take action against extremism and violence. Some of these mechanisms are already taking effect, while others need further development in order to become effective.

We need a **clear and sufficiently deterrent legal framework, effectively applied in every Member State, to counter discrimination, hate-crime and hate-speech.** When extremism and populism tend to illegality, such as incitement to hate or bordering on physical or psychological aggression, we should make full use of the criminal laws and judicial procedures to investigate and sanction them as appropriate.

The EU and its member states should facilitate, **under clear and strict regulation, the collection and publishing of statistical data regarding hate crime,** in order to better apply existing legislation.

We need to continue our struggle for a **European Directive against all forms of discrimination,** inside and outside the working environment. In a Europe where we talk about migration, asylum, ethnic or religious minorities, gender equality, it is of utmost importance to create the legal framework that would provide common benchmarks for the protection of all citizens against any form of discrimination. **A more effective implementation of the Council framework decision on combating racism and xenophobia and its extension to cover gender-related crimes** is also an important point for us.

One of the priorities should be to **set in motion the Commission's EU Rule of Law scoreboard,** monitoring the state of rule of law and fundamental values in all Member states. This will give the EU a full monitoring capacity, ranging from political dialogue, moral suasion, financial and technical support, to legal infringement and to the end solution of article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, the "nuclear weapon".

There should be a **strict application of the new EU legislation for funding of European political parties,** conditional on observing the values on which the European Union is founded.

Protect the fundamental principles and civil liberties of the European Union

Fundamental values are not a luxury that we can afford to give up or bend at times of economic crisis. On the contrary, it is now more than ever that we need to stick by the values enshrined in the treaties (Article 2 TEU), such as "the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities", which all Member States have pledged to respect and protect. But these fundamental values are currently under threat, challenged directly by the far right, or more insidiously by right wing governments allured by the possible gains of adopting populist rhetoric.

It is our responsibility, as the leading progressive force in Europe, to engage even more strongly in promoting "pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men" as the core principles of our society. We need to continue our fight for **better mechanisms to protect democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights and freedoms in the European Union,** including through the creation of new tools for addressing breaches in Member States.