

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



The use of past in political discourse and the representation of (post)colonialism in European museums

January 2019

This policy brief connects representations of postcolonialism in populist politics and in museums based on fieldwork conducted in Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Turkey.

This Policy Brief is relevant for:

EUROPEAN COMMISSION	because	it can counter negative presentations of the EU in populist discourse
NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS	because	they can actively counter far-right populist discourses on broader levels
LOCAL ADMINISTRATIONS	because	they are closest to European citizens and can influence individuals' views on populist discourse
HERITAGE and MUSEUM SECTOR	because	it raises heritage institutions' awareness about the political valence of their representations and narratives.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1** – Policy makers should interpret right-wing populism as the consequence of long-lasting social-economic and political inequalities; rather than a pathological matter.
- **Recommendation 2** – Policy makers at local, national and European levels should understand that supporters of right-wing populist parties are not necessarily racists, fascists or xenophobes. They are rather inclined to hold onto such xenophobic discourses because they have impact.
- **Recommendation 3** – Mainstream political parties should focus on socio-economic and psychological matters to communicate better with electorates, whose feelings of socio-economically deprivation make them liable to nostalgic views of the past that may be divisive in the present.
- **Recommendation 4** – the European Commission (EC) should recognize that the EU's *Unity in Diversity* motto does not successfully translate into the lives of lower-educated, geographically-immobile, socio-economically deprived, and psychologically humiliated social groups who tend to see both 'diversity' and 'unity' as threats to wellbeing.
- **Recommendation 5** – To address right-wing populist parties' supporters, the EC should analyse the reasons for contemporary populism through social-economic, political and psychological factors rather than through civilizational and religious differences.
- **Recommendation 6** – Policy makers at various levels should recognize the key role of cultural representations and collective memory in politics and should take this seriously as part of, and in addition to, the usual focus on socio-political factors.
- **Recommendation 7** – In order to accommodate the growing interest in making colonial histories more visible in European ethnographic, historic, and contemporary art museums, institutions develop on long-term strategic missions to address silenced and hidden histories.
- **Recommendation 8** – European Institutions should concede that museum and heritage institutions promoting a common 'European heritage' carry the risk that their representations can be interpreted not as inclusive and open but as evidence of the existence of a narrowly conceived 'European culture', excluding many who live in Europe who may not identify with the traditional canon of European heritage.

CoHERE: Critical Heritages – performing and representing identities in Europe, seeks to explore and analyse productions and meanings of the European past in the present. Heritage is made in the myriad practices and cultural forms where the past is valorised for the present, from folk traditions to museums and memorials, the management of historic sites and traditions, and everyday matters such as education, political discourse, home life, food consumption and people's relations with place. Likewise, contemporary connections with events, cultures and sites from prehistory to the very recent past may all be important for the construction of identities, values and futures.

Overview

This policy brief derives from the CoHERE WP2 research on the socio-political consequences for Europe of the uses of the past in contemporary populism as well as on the ways in which European museums respond to such uses, especially with regard to representations of colonialism and post-colonialism. Populist discourse exploits the past and heritage to construct the 'self' through 'othering' and excluding many groups such as minorities, immigrants and refugees from a stronger inclusion into European society. As such, a dominant understanding of a homogeneous national identity and heritage, as well as European identity and heritage is constructed.



A line of Syrian refugees crossing the border of Hungary and Austria on their way to Germany. Hungary, Central Europe, 6 September 2015.

Source: https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_line_of_Syrian_refugees_crossing_the_border_of_Hungary_and_Austria_on_their_way_to_Germany._Hungary,_Central_Europe,_6_September_2015.jpg

To explore this topic, WP2 first investigated this issue through desk research on the various conceptualisations of populism, discourse analysis of the manifestos of populist political parties and the speeches of their leaders. Subsequent fieldwork included approximately 20 interviews in each of the following: *5 Star Movement* (5MS) in Rome, *Golden Dawn* supporters in Athens, *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) supporters in Dresden, *Front National* (FN) supporters in Toulon, *Party for Freedom* (PVV) supporters in Rotterdam, *Justice and Development Party* (JDP) supporters in Istanbul. A further strand of research focused on European museums and international platforms such as Documenta and the Venice Biennial: we carried out exhibition display analyses in a number of selected museums as well as over 25 extensive, semi-structured interviews with relevant curators and/or museum directors. The exhibitions we analysed in this way were located in selected ethnographic, historic and contemporary art museums, mostly in capital cities, namely, Copenhagen in Denmark, Berlin in Germany, Rome in Italy, Barcelona in Spain, and Amsterdam, Eindhoven, and The Hague in the Netherlands.

Introduction

Contrary to populist leaders' claims, Islam and immigration are not the source of Europe's current problems. Rather, they are used by populist political leaders to evade facing up to socio-economic issues and reconstruct the past in ways that suit their agenda. In doing so, they employ cultural terms to discuss social and economic issues, which is what we call *Heritage Populism*. This misleadingly links historical understandings to animosities in the present, relying on a civilizational discourse and a process of 'othering'. For instance, popularist party leaders in western European countries often present secularism as an achievement of Western civilisation and present Islam as its non-secular counterpart.

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Museums offer active and interesting platform for rethinking the lasting presence of colonialism and a colonial worldview in the fabric of European lives and institutions, potentially enabling the emergence of new insights and counterpoints to populists' uses of the past. This happens despite the problems, tensions, and occasional failures necessarily involved in reframing such a contentious European past: although there have been more and more frequent calls for decolonizing museums, this is a complex, fraught task. The fundamental problem is that those museums and cultural institutions that today champion decolonial thinking can themselves be seen as colonial institutions, for they were deeply embedded in the histories and power structures that they now see to critique. If decolonial projects within museums today are to a large extent problematic and unsatisfactory and fail to adequately represent the presence and ongoing 'ruination' of colonialism, to use Ann Stoler's (2008) powerful metaphor, they are nevertheless a necessary step in the process of turning museums into inclusive public spaces conducive to inclusive identities.

Research findings

Populist leaders' anti-immigrant, and nativist discourses reproduce the 'clash of civilizations' discourse, in which ethnic, cultural and religious differences are portrayed as threats to national identity. What is mainly a social and political problem is often reduced to a cultural and religious clash in a way that disrupts peace and social cohesion.

Multiculturalism and immigrants' cultures are seen as a threat to European identity

Populist political leaders and their supporters are sceptical about multiculturalism, which they perceive as a failed experiment driven by the EU. They want immigrants to be

assimilated through national education, and only welcome those willing to assimilate. Multicultural Europe is seen as a threat to national identity, thus populist leaders and party members prefer co-existence without interaction rather than embracing EU's emphasis on embracing diversity and dialogue. Populist rhetoric therefore promotes the defence and preservation of national identity.

Populist discourse manipulates cultural differences to problematize the state of refugees except in the Turkish case. The JDP and its supporters deploy kinship and regional 'responsibilities' towards Syrian refugees. Common concerns among populist party supporters are competition in the job market; and access to welfare schemes. Additionally, populist leaders and their supporters call for restriction on the number of refugees, and stricter assessment of their backgrounds and qualifications. Framing this point as EU's failure, populist leaders in EU member states legitimize their anti-EU sentiments.

Populist discourse does not contest or refuse the EU's commitment to peace, but it omits the political and economic environment leading up to European integration. As such, populist rhetoric exploits the financial crisis to endorse anti-EU sentiments. Golden Dawn supporters in Greece, however, perceive the EU as unfair and accuse it of tarnishing the country's image. Brexit is a common thread in populist discourse, and it is considered an example of how EU member states can survive without the EU, irrespective of the social division, economic uncertainty and political strife that the UK's planned departure from the EU has involved.

Islamophobia is legitimised using fear and the risk of terrorism

In countries other than Turkey, Islam and immigrants are associated with fundamentalism, ISIS, and the perceived threat of an Islamic take-over. Muslim men, in particular, are considered threats, and seen as potential terrorists who are attempting to instil Shari'a rule. Women are seen as marginalized and oppressed in a way that runs counter to a 'European' achievement of gender equality. Conflicts between Islam and Europe are often discussed in relation to the 1683 Siege of Vienna to signal a potential invasion (e.g. it is sometimes called 'the original 9/11'). While the JDP does not express this view, JDP supporters argue that Syrian refugees are likely to have terrorist ties.

The possibility of a shared European identity is seen as a threat to national identity

Populist leaders and their supporters do not have a distinct definition of European culture, or identity. They reject the idea of a homogeneous European identity as well as a shared-memory of European history.

Financial crises and the refugee crisis are exploited to reinforce anti-EU sentiments.

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They emphasize the protection of national culture and identity against a perceived threat of homogenization brought on by EU membership. This perpetuates nationalist ideals by promoting cultural differentiation. While WWII is the commonly-acknowledged rupture in European history, each member state is understood to have its own distinct contribution to European culture.

Right-wing Populism differs from its predecessors

Contemporary right-wing populist parties in Europe are far from their “far-right”, or “extreme right-wing” predecessors, because right-wing populism has been mainstreamed. Former populist parties were mostly marginal ones investing in racist and xenophobic political discourses appealing to some radicalized social groups located at the margins of the majority societies.

The predecessors of the current right-wing populist parties were mostly marginal parties investing in racist and xenophobic political discourses, whereas today's right-wing populist parties appeal to larger numbers of people in Europe due to carefully developed policy proposals.

Marine Le Pen's FN, Wilders' PVV, or Gauland's AfD are significantly different from former far-right parties such as the NPD and REP in Germany, Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN in France, or Bossi's Lega Nord in Italy. Current right-wing populist parties have successfully diversified their political discourses. Rather than simply investing in a narrow-minded

racist political rhetoric, they engage in *welfare policies* to remedy the immediate needs of working-class people, or unemployed groups who were negatively affected by processes of de-industrialization, globalization, international trade, and Europeanization. They have now become catch-all parties, which also attract women and LGBTI groups across all the social classes. Furthermore, it is no longer a surprise to come across such right-wing populist parties with a very strong environmentalist, leftist, and critical political discourse appealing to larger segments of the society.

Populist rhetoric may be trickery played by the weak

Populism is not a pathological matter. It is the consequence of existing socio-economic and political disparities that have afflicted Europe over the last few decades. In times of socio-economic and political crises, individuals tend to establish communities in order to protect themselves against the threats posed by neo-liberalism, globalism, multiculturalism, diversity, deindustrialization etc., and to cope with uncertainty, insecurity, unemployment,

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exclusion and poverty in the age of deindustrialization.

Ethno-cultural and civilizational communities refer to symbolic walls of protection, cohesion and solidarity. For those who feel politically, socially and economically neglected, it becomes opportune to speak from the margins so in order to be heard by ruling political elites. For instance, it may be a practical tactic to use an Islamophobic discourse, or a populist discourse, in order to be easily heard by decision makers. Hence, one should be careful about pathologizing the right-wing populism by immediately equating it with past phenomena such as Nazism, Fascism, Francoism etc. The risk is that mainstream parties may instrumentalize the fear of the past, such as anxieties about the return of Nazism, in order to conceal their failure to resolve current structural problems. Populist rhetoric as well as Islamophobic rhetoric may be trickery played by the weak.

Majority of the supporters of right-wing populist parties are not religious by habitus, they are mostly secular, agnostic, or even atheist.

The growing appeal by right-wing populist party supporters to ideas of culture, nativism, authenticity, ethnicity, religiosity, traditions, myths, and civilization provides them with means to establish solidarity networks against structural problems. The interviews we

conducted show that majority of the supporters of right-wing populist parties are not religious by habitus. They are mostly secular, agnostic, or even atheist. Although many respondents expressed their distance to religion, they linked their Islamophobic sentiments to the belief that Christianity is the proper religio-cultural characteristic of Europe.

Reframing the colonial in European museums

The problems of facing the colonial past have recently been dramatically addressed across diverse museums in Europe at a time when they attempt to reposition themselves as fora for public debate and as an emancipatory social tool (e.g., Barrett 2012). Museum curators have begun to examine and act upon the multiple forms of systemic, structural violence and the power relations that sustain the museum institution. The Netherlands is one such country, where the colonial past has been heavily debated in recent years in new ways, particularly but not exclusively in and around museums. In fact, museums have played an important role in triggering these debates.

Signaling a growing interest in making colonial histories more visible, several museums across Europe have recently renewed or are in the process of renewing their colonial exhibits. Some are planning exhibitions that lay bare and discuss their colonial genealogies. In 2017-2018 alone, several ethnographic and some historical museums have inaugurated major new exhibitions on colonialism in Germany, Denmark, Austria, and the Netherlands; key others are due to open between 2019 and 2020 in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy. Contemporary decolonial art exhibitions or exhibitions dealing with colonial

themes are proliferating, especially across the Netherlands and Germany. This turn comes in response to increasing critique from diverse quarters – particularly minority activists and academics – for institutional change. While this new attention is a positive development, it nevertheless raises a set of questions around the possibilities and limits of this kind of colonial reckoning. Simultaneously, this work of reframing colonialism and the representation of “others” within museums has proven as an important measure to facilitate minorities’ and immigrants’ integration and community cohesion. European museums should be encouraged to further develop the work of showing how multiculture is a constituent feature of both Europe’s past and present, and the potentials of this should be addressed for changing xenophobic attitudes and countering exclusionary, misleading and tactical uses of the past designed to foment division and capitalize on people’s disaffection whose real causes lie elsewhere in systemic problems.

Additional sources

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Summary statement

Populist discourse is intolerant towards ethno-religious and cultural diversity in Europe, which vilifies plurality and diversity in favour of a homogeneous society. Anti-immigrant sentiments which are detrimental to Europe’s social cohesion, such as anger towards refugees, Islamophobia, and exaggerated narratives of economic competition in the labour market, are central to populists’ reading of European history. However, we should not forget

that populism is not a pathological issue; it is rather the consequence of a long-lasting process of social-economic, political and psychological deprivation.

As Europe increasingly confronts the realities of its colonial past, museums that house the physical legacy of this history are in an uncomfortable position. Many museums have been wrestling with decolonisation, whether in terms of presenting their permanent collection more politically correctly, arranging for artefacts to travel on loan to formerly colonized states, or working on collaborations and temporary exhibitions that open new perspectives on colonial histories. A century after the 'scramble for Africa' ended, museums are recognising that discussions about the fate of collections and control of the narratives need to involve many more actors. There is also the compelling moral case for restitution of the objects that were stolen from colonized countries or societies. The complex issues of how this should happen, to which institutions, and on what terms, need to be examined by a broader audience. Museums are well placed to represent alternative histories of Europe to show that transcultural connections – such as those of the colonial project, among others – have in effect formed European culture and heritage. This can counter populist-xenophobic appeals to view 'cultural others' such as migrants as a threat to and imposition on European culture.

Policy recommendations

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Our research demonstrates that there is a link between populism and scepticism towards the EU. We recommend that the EC should:

- create a European-level approach to migration, including an integration policy, since populist discourse exploits the lack of a clear vision on this issue;
- be more transparent about the management of migration flows, since populist parties misuse lack of information;
- create specialized institutions – including museums – to fight Islamophobia, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments;
- co-operate/co-ordinate with national governments to address differences in national populist movements/parties;

The European Commission should reaffirm its commitment to diversity, share its vision for European society and condemn acts of racism and overt Islamophobia to avert the further intensification of clashes.



Symbolic illustration of the European Commission's approach to immigration

Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/photo/photoDetails.cfm?sitelang=en&mgid=5#31>

approaches that help audiences to understand the linkage between histories of Europe (in particular the colonial past and historic Islamic cultures in the continent) and contemporary society, in order to correct misleading views of cultural homogeneity threatened by others.

- establish a platform for museums across Europe through to share training, information and best practices, potentially through the E4P (*European Past in the Present: Politics and Policy*) professional development programme proposed in the CoHERE Policy Brief *Productions and Omissions of European Heritage*; and
- collaborate with UNESCO to discuss new developments in the international heritage sector relating to multicultural societies and political uses of the past.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

We have found that national governments' approach to refugees is central to increasing awareness about the plight of immigrants. We recommend that national governments;

National governments of EU Member States should reiterate their commitment to peace in Europe and to the EU to illustrate that there is a common vision of the future, even if there is no single shared-memory of European heritage; they should engage in dialogue with populist movement/party representatives rather than pathologizing them by using the past.

- revise history, geography and citizenship textbooks, to establish more global histories and histories of Islam, and the historically tight relationship between the Middle east and Europe;

- provide platforms to discuss various ways that the past is used in political discourse to initiate discussions on the productive and responsible ways of using the past by engaging in dialogue with populist movement/party representatives;
- devise an integration strategy for refugees and immigrants, in collaboration with civil society organizations and the EU while considering the vulnerability of refugees to economic exploitation;
- provide history awareness and tolerance training to government employees, teachers, and others who frequently encounter different cultures and ethnicities;



Sign stating “Our Europe is without borders” held in a protest in Germany.

Source:

<https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/20/has-the-refugee-crisis-damaged-trust-in-the-european-project/#.W1VpkdlzaM8>

- publicly explain the benefits of giving refugees access social welfare schemes to counter criticisms that this strategy is unfair to locals;
- establish a network of museums to facilitate communication within this sector;
- establish programmes for the education and networking of curators; and
- utilize heritage sites more efficiently by collaborating with UNESCO and highlighting the significance of UNESCO certified heritage to national culture and heritage.

LOCAL ADMINISTRATIONS

Our research indicates that supporters of populist parties often have personal experiences rooted in their locality of perceived conflict and competition with immigrants, refugees, or Muslims. We recommend that local governments;

Local administrations should cooperate with refugees and immigrants to integrate them into the society in line with their needs and interests;

- cooperate with refugees and immigrants to integrate them into society in line with their needs and interests, while cooperating with civil society to establish a network informing the local communities about immigrants;
- organize activities, such as excursions or festivals, to enable dialogue between different communities to illustrate diversity among local communities;
- create job opportunities for immigrants and refugees to eradicate the perceived competition between locals and immigrants;
- establish platforms to discuss concerns surrounding colonialism, intolerance, Islamophobia, and xenophobia in order to reflect EU's approach to these issues; and

- increase public funding for economic and social inclusion to support activities, amongst others in the heritage sector.

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