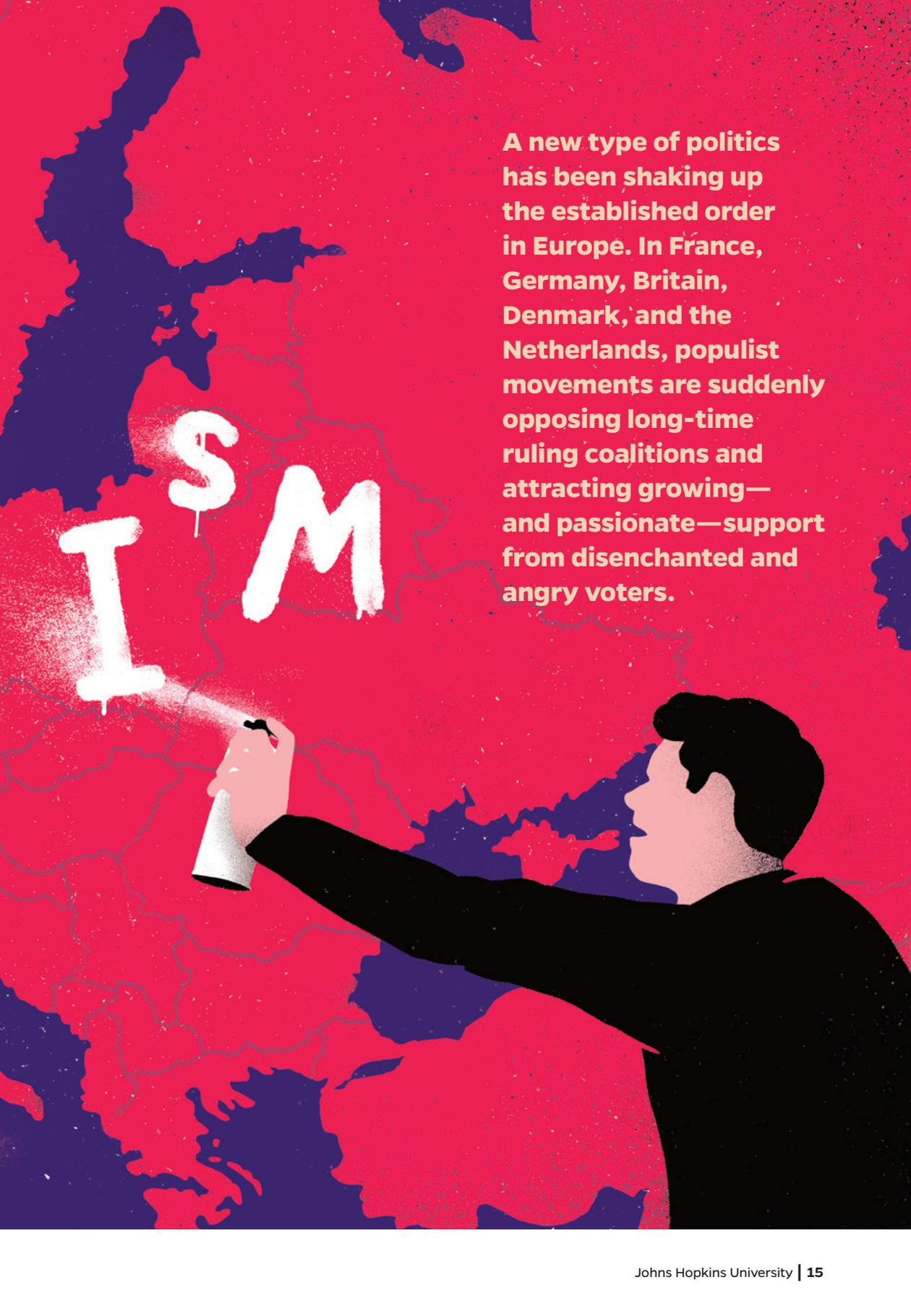




Is this the new European order?

By Phillip Davis B'88, '89

A stylized map of Europe is shown in red and blue. The word "ISM" is written in large, white, block letters across the map. A person in a black silhouette is shown from the side, holding a white spray can and spraying the letters. The background is a textured red and blue.

A new type of politics has been shaking up the established order in Europe. In France, Germany, Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, populist movements are suddenly opposing long-time ruling coalitions and attracting growing—and passionate—support from disenchanting and angry voters.

Populism is finding echoes

ven in the United States, where president-elect Donald J. Trump used populist themes—such as opposition to increased immigration and scorn for Washington insiders—in his successful run for the White House.

In France, the National Front and its leader, Marine Le Pen, outpolled the ruling Socialist party in the 2015 European Parliament elections. In local elections in Germany this year, the Alternative für Deutschland party beat Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic party in Merkel's home state, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. And the UK Independence Party pushed past establishment opposition and was instrumental in Britain's earth-shaking vote to leave the European Union in June 2016.

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They feel a loss of identity, and they are narrowly defining community along ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines.

— Stephen Szabo

Europe's populist parties are homegrown and, as such, have distinctive national characteristics. But they also share things in common, experts told *SAIS Magazine*. For starters, they are all extolling nationalist identity politics in reaction to the tide of multiculturalism that is the new norm in Europe. That's the view of

Stephen Szabo, an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins SAIS and executive director of the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Academy.

"I call them anti-multiculti," Szabo said. "These are parties that believe very strongly in an ethnic community based pretty much on heritage and not based on the fact that you're a new citizen or newly arrived migrant. What's going on is they feel a loss of identity, and they are narrowly defining community along ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines."

That feeling has clearly found expression in Denmark, where the populist Danish People's Party (PVV) this year pushed through a bill in the city of Randers ordering that pork be served in school lunch rooms. The measure was a response to reports that some schools had stopped serving the meat due to protests from Muslim families. Denmark is a major pork producer, and the PVV said Danish culture was under assault.





Populist party supporters also feel alienated by decisions made by "technocratic elites" in Brussels, where the European Union is headquartered.

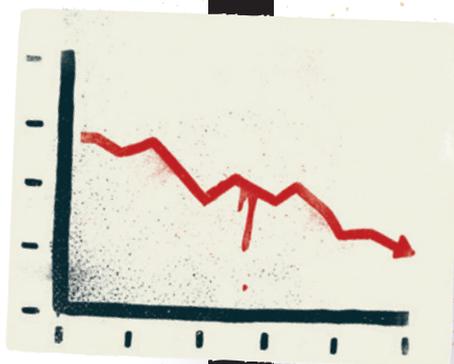
Boris Ruge B'88, '89 is minister and deputy chief of mission at the German Embassy in Washington, DC, and a longtime observer of European politics. "Across Europe, there are people who look at the European Union, and they feel a loss of control," he said. "They feel that their capacity or the capacity of their national governments to decide things has been diminished."

The lack of British influence over the actions of faceless bureaucrats in Brussels, of course, was a major part of the UK Independence Party's argument for leaving the E.U.

Moreover, Ruge said, that feeling of alienation has accompanied a very real stagnation in income and job prospects in European economies over the past two decades, compounded by the Euro crisis in 2009. According to a recent McKinsey Global Institute report, "The real incomes of about two-thirds of households in 25 advanced economies were flat or fell between 2005 and 2014." Many middle-class earners make less, in inflation-adjusted terms, than they did decades ago.

"That is not in line with people's expectations," Ruge said. "Our parent's generation and our generation have grown up expecting forward movement and real income growth—that our children will be able to do as well as or better than their parents. And this is an assumption that has now been challenged."

London, UK, June 21, Unidentified people demonstrating against austerity in London, holding anti-austerity signs. The demonstration was organized by the People's Assembly, UK.





Krakow, Poland, November 11, 2015: Protesters march through center of city. About 3,000 people took part in March of Free Poland. Participants chanted slogans “Neither EU nor NATO, Poland only for Poles.”

Almost all of these populist parties are reacting to dislocations caused by massive inflows of refugees and immigrants, many from Islamic countries such as Syria. Germany alone accepted more than 1 million immigrants in 2015, and even island Britain was the destination for some 600,000 (although a large percentage of those migrants came from Christian countries in Eastern Europe).

“Absorbing all these migrants has been a real challenge,” said SAIS’ director of European and Eurasian Studies, Erik Jones B’89, ’90, PhD ’96. Beyond that, he added, the parties have used immigration to appeal to the fears and insecurity of the electorate.

Jones said one of the first to tap into this mix of insecurity and fear of change was Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn, a journalist and commentator, quickly rose to prominence in 2001 when he entered politics as a leftist but then morphed into a critic of Islamic immigration in Holland.

“Pim told a story that Islam was challenging basic Dutch values,” Jones said, “which was a paradox because up until that point, there had been no basic Dutch values—as political life had been structured around subnational political communities and not a national political identity. He essentially created a new form of Dutch nationalism.”

The self-named Pim Fortuyn List (PFL) political party struck a nerve with Dutch voters. Within months of its formation, it shocked the political class when it won a major electoral victory in Rotterdam in 2002. Just a few months later—before the party could advance further—Fortuyn was assassinated. The PFL’s successor, the Party for Freedom, now leads opinion polls in advance of the Dutch general election in March 2017.

The world is enjoying a populist moment.

– Daniele Pletka B’86, ’87



The template the PFL successfully used has been replicated in other countries. “Think of it as identity-based mobilization,” Jones said. “When times are bad, or when you feel things are jeopardized, who has the most compelling message? It’s the politician who says, ‘It’s not your fault, it’s the fault of the other who are not like you.’”

There is some merit to that sentiment, said Daniele Pletka, B’86, ’87, senior vice president of the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute. “The world is enjoying a populist moment” in the wake of the Brexit vote, she added.

Speaking to news magazine *Politico* recently, Pletka said populist sentiments “rest on real complaints. If national leaders are committed to addressing the real problems that lie beneath the populism—a growing underclass, tides of refugees, and anger at government, not necessarily in that order—then Brexit will be a wake-up call. Otherwise, it could be 1933 all over again, with years of fractured politics, anger, dangerous decisions, isolationism, and worse ahead.

“It’s up to those who wish for the crown of leadership to choose,” she said.

SAIS’ Jones agreed that this populist “moment” will not fade anytime soon and cited two reasons. First, he said, leftist parties have not formulated a response to the legitimate grievances aired by the populists. Secondly, the large numbers of immigrants already in Europe, and the difficulties in absorbing, assimilating, and finding them jobs, will keep issues of national identity and economic competition on the forefront for the foreseeable future.

“This is not going to go away,” he said.

Phillip Davis B’88, ’89 is a journalist based in San Francisco. He has addressed international issues on National Public Radio and written about them for Congressional Quarterly and other publications.

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— Erik Jones B’86, ’87,
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