



# Political Polarisation: The Way Forward?

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**FEPS Activity Report**

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**G | M | F** The German Marshall Fund  
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FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
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The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) organised a breakout dinner on the topic “Political Polarisation: The Way Forward” in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) on the 24th March 2017 at the Restaurant Maison du Cygne in Brussels, Belgium.

The informal setting allowed for an engaging and fluid discussion on the topic among participants and experts, notably William Drozdiak, Non-resident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Centre on the US and Europe, the Brookings Institute and Mario Gavenda, Member of FEPS Young Academic Network.

Maria Freitas, FEPS Policy Advisor, moderated the breakout dinner. Throughout the dinner three guiding questions framed the discussions:

**1. How do we start a new consensus building process in this fluid and polarized political context?**

**2. What and who is altering democracy, and how we engage the younger generations into the political processes?**

**3. How can mainstream politics and media counteract recent trends of post-factual attitude?**

Experts and participants agreed that the recent wave of popular discontent led to the strengthening of populist movements and parties through the Western world. Even though Populism, as an anti-establishment phenomena remains in opposition in most countries, in others such as Hungary or the United States of America (USA) we see that these parties and their politicians have successfully managed to engage in politics as the true and only representatives of “the people” against “the elites” being in power already for a number of years or by securing election into government.

In the analysis of the root causes that enable the growth of this worrying phenomena, experts and participants conveyed various explanations for the populist upsurge:

- The decrease of electoral participation;
- The disappointment with liberal and representative democracy;
- The dwindling membership in political parties;
- The growing feeling of powerlessness of citizens and thus the waning distrust in established political institutions and their political leaders.

Against this backdrop, unexpected events such as the refugee crisis, the British referendum on leaving the European Union (EU) and the election of a right-wing populist as President of the USA have further challenged the structures and the adaptability of today's democratic systems and placed into question their adaptability and efficiency. What is more, 21st century trends such as globalisation, digitisation and the social tensions surrounding the refugee crisis have been used by the populist to create fear and cultivate new divisions between citizens and countries.

Political polarisation as a result of the the Populism as a phenomena that is increasingly marking contemporary societies and in particular the younger generations was seen positively by some and negatively by others throughout the debate. As a distinctive feature of some cohorts of the younger generations, political polarisation was argued to be a disruptive element that would force mainstream political parties to be better adapted to today's realities. Others however argued that such divisions would make the consensus building exercise at the societal and political level even more difficult. Political leadership was seen as essential to rekindle the relationship between citizens and the political institutions governing.