



**Joint policy event of the cluster of H2020 projects on
populism**

**Unmasking populism – modalities, scenarios, and
responses to a persistent threat**

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-REPORT-

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our democratic societies, posing unprecedented challenges to personal freedoms, the reliability of information and, ultimately, the ability of democratic institutions to cope with the rapidly changing societal demands. This adds up to a tumultuous decade for European democracy, that saw the rise of populist movements and anti-European sentiments fuelling disintegration drives.

Three Horizon 2020 research projects, DEMOS, POPREBEL and PaCE have analysed the phenomenon of populism and its consequences for European democracies and the EU at large, identifying and understanding the causes of populism as well as strategies for strengthening democratic values and practices.

Innovative, evidence-based research is vital to respond to the challenges faced by European democracy. This is why, on April 19th, the research teams gathered during an online policy event to present and discuss policy relevant insights and findings on the multifaceted phenomenon of populism, with a specific focus on possible policy actions and recommendations, as they approach the end of their research work plans.

The entire event was **moderated by Ms Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director of the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)**. It took place online on the WebEx platform and was recorded. The event gathered 102 participants.

2. OPENING REMARKS

The opening remarks of the joint policy event were made by **Irene Norstedt**, Director of the People Directorate, DG R&I, European Commission. She presented the 3 projects financed by Horizon 2020 – PaCE, Prorabel and DEMOS that mobilized more than 30 institutions between which universities, NGO's, citizen foundations, social enterprises, municipalities and citizens, who joined forces in order to address the populist threat.

Initially, she welcomed and thanked all the participants and the coordinators of the three projects (PaCE, Prorabel and DEMOS).

Moving further, she commented on the role of the EU's framework program for research and innovation and the importance of engaging citizens and civil society organizations in policymaking. The transparent participatory processes are one of the main principles of the programme to accomplish innovative approaches and to find new solutions for democratic governance. Ms. Norstedt stated that Horizon Europe will continue the work of the previous EU programme "Horizon 2020", especially in the area of innovative research on democracy. She mentioned that there are already two published calls, and she also announced the news that one new call is on the way for "Network for innovative solutions for the future of democracy".

Her third remark was regarding the new stand EU has taken in the name of democracy with the bottom line that democracy cannot be taken for granted and the threats have to be addressed, populism being one of them. The Commission is using not only its funding instrument but also adopted a "European Democracy Action Plan" that aims at involving all stakeholders together with the civil society for straightening the democracy in the EU. The action plan includes measures to straighten media freedom and pluralism, to fight against disinformation and assure free and fair elections. She also mentioned some of the initiatives developed under the action plan like the proposed regulation on transparency and targeting of political advertisement, the legislation to straighten the rights and protect journalists and civil rights defenders and also the media freedom act, that will be presented in the course of 2022.

She then highlighted that recent Euro barometer data highlight the desire of citizens for their voices to be heard with the majority declaring that democracy indeed needs to be straightened.

Democracy depends on the continuous participation of citizens in public life and shaping policies, and deliberative democracy is giving the needed space for citizens to have their voices heard in decision-making.

3. DEMAND AND DRIVERS FOR POPULISM: GENERAL AND SPECIFIC SOCIO-POLITICAL DRIVERS OF POPULAR SUPPORT

3.1 The role of economic problems in driving support for populism

András TÉTÉNYI, Corvinus University of Budapest

The opening topic in the first session discussed the role of economic problems in driving support for populism. The presentation started with **Andreas Tétényi**, Director of the International Economy and Business Msc at the Corvinus University of Budapest. He introduced a study under the project POPREBEL which focused on the impact of major exogenous shocks on populist voting. The identified exogenous shocks were unemployment, inflation, and construction share as a part of GVA (Gross value added). The research included data between 2000-2020 in 8 countries (Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), looking at both parliamentary and EU parliamentary election results.

One general observed trend was the steady but significant increase in support for populist parties over the 20 years studied, starting from 20% in 2000, and reaching 60% by 2019. Focusing on the individual exogenous shocks that were studied, the higher the inflation and unemployment rates are, the higher the populist vote is, while, interestingly, the higher the construction share as part of the GVA the lower the populist vote is.

The second presenter on this topic, **Dr Attila Bartha**, Researcher at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Center for Social Sciences, presented the main policy findings of the DEMOS project identifying the main predictors of populism in the future. According to the findings, the main predictors and triggers of populism are higher levels of poverty and social exclusion, higher NETT (Non-Education, Employment and Training) rate of youth (15-34), extreme macroeconomic vulnerability profile, policy polarization and technocratic governance. Dr Bartha marked the main policy tasks to mitigate populism are the inclusion of youth, lowering poverty avoiding extreme macroeconomic vulnerability and in crisis periods also avoiding technocratic crisis management.

The third, final presenter of the topic was **Dr Daniel Smilov**, Associate Professor at the University of Sofia; and Programme Director, Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia. Dr Smilov shared that there is an absence of consistent evidence about the influence of economic hardship on voting for populist/nativist parties in Eastern Europe. A more complex causal mechanism links economic problems with support for populism. The worsening of economic conditions increases status anxiety, which drives the populist vote. The researcher looked deeper into the cultural drivers of populist parties to explain the populist vote in Eastern Europe. Another conclusion is that populist voters are not ideological, but strategic voters – for example, they are supporting populist parties because they are demanding lower taxes, not necessarily sharing other radical populist views.

3.2 Socio-cultural factors behind populism: nationalism and religion

Zdzisław MACH, Jagiellonian University Krakow

The second presentation of the session focused on socio-cultural factors behind populism: nationalism and religion. The lead presenter **Dr Zdzisław Mach**, the Head of the Institute for European Studies at the Jagiellonian University of Krakow followed a different approach to understanding populism. He started by presenting the POPREBEL project which gives a broad, comprehensive look at populism including cultural and economic perspectives, and also supply and demand sides. Dr Mach discussed four main factors for the development of populism. He first started with the concept of ethnic nationalism which is based on the cult of ancestors. It builds upon a collective identity based on a shared cultural tradition that is against cosmopolitanism, liberalism, European liberal values, integration of diversity and so on.

Tradition is another important factor when talking about populism because it provides simple and definite answers to difficult questions, and it is a remedy for ontological insecurity.

Tradition is strongly supported by religion – another factor Dr Mach focused on as an essential component of cultural tradition and the core element of national identity. The presenter also mentioned the ideological and political connection of religion with ethnic nationalism and the mutual support between the church and the populist's nation State, where the church provides sanctions of the traditional social and moral order.

A picture of a polarized society was painted, where populists are opposing liberals and moderate conservatives and where the populist discourse contrasts “the people” with the cosmopolitans and corrupt elites, both domestic and European.

3.3 A focus on competent government and not ignoring sections of the electorate in face of populist challenge

Bruce EDMONDS, Manchester Metropolitan University

The third topic in the session discussed the potential of a competent government that does not ignore sections of the electorate in face of populist challenges. The topic was presented by **Dr Bruce Edmonds**, Professor of Social Simulation at Manchester Metropolitan University, based on research under the PaCE project. Dr Edmonds explained that the reservoir of discontent provides opportunities to mobilize and leverage electoral support by a credible and accessible leader that arises. This electorate is made of people whose standard of living is decreasing and is taken for granted by the established parties. The populists are then focusing on this electorate, noticing problems concerning to the electorate that the other parties disregard. Sections of the population, whose incomes are squeezed and who feel “ignored” by politicians can quickly defect in a crisis. Therefore, it is important for politicians to be respectful of all sections of the electorate, addressing their needs rather than a particular narrative. Dr Edmonds also advised a positive vision that includes all sections without abandoning respect and safeguards of diversity and minorities.

3.4 Individual level variables: emotions, political knowledge, information, and values

Zsolt BODA, Centre for Social Sciences Budapest

The last topic of the session focused on Individual level variables: emotions, political knowledge, information, and values. **Dr Zsolt Boda** from the Centre for Social Sciences Budapest representing the DEMOS project started his presentation by pointing out one of the most important questions when talking about populism. Namely, *“Who are the people that are supporting it through the prism of their attitudes, emotions, and values, what do they know about politics, and is it possible to influence those individual characteristics of the people?”*. The development of populism shows that populists’ attitudes include people centrism, anti-elitism and Manichean outlook and that the emotions that are predicting populist attitudes are resentment and anger towards the government or specific social groups.

Dr Veronica Davidov, Associate Professor at the Monmouth University, was part of the POPREBEL team and presented her ethnographic research offering insights into how emotions and politics are connected. Such insights prove valuable in bypassing identity threats through designing interventions. She presented data visualizations illustrating the connection of “anger” with more solid political issues (financial crises, lockdown, government inefficiency etc.) while

"trust" is connected more with uncertainties and ambiguities that are politicized (the notion of justified decisions, shifting or changing rules etc.). "Both emotions and political sentiments are highly nuanced and are connected in nuanced ways, and attention to those nuances can be productively mobilized in creating strategic interventions when dealing with populism."

Dr Boda continued his presentation, focussing on the attitudes that predict "populist attitudes" through the concept of political efficacy – low external and high internal political efficacy can predict populist attitudes. On the other hand, the concept of democratic capacities decreases the populist appeal and moderates its attitudes through democratic values (tolerance, equality, autonomy, compromise), political knowledge, reflexivity, information, and lack of extreme partisanship.

At the end of the presentation, Dr Boda posed two questions for discussion – How can we develop democratic capacities? And how to influence feelings?

4. SOCIOECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF POPULISM

4.1 Economic policy of populist governments

István BENCZÉS, Corvinus University of Budapest

The opening topic of the second session was focused on the economic policy of populist governments and was presented by **Dr István Benczés** from the Corvinus University of Budapest. In his research, he examines the economic consequences that the dominance of populism can have on the economy. Traditionally, populist economic policy is characterised by myopic redistribution policies at the macro-level, trade protectionism and anti-multilateralism. However, in the case of EU Member States, such policies at the macro-level are obstructed due to the strict numerical policy rules imposed by the Stability and Growth pact and the conditions defined under the Single Market agreement.

Therefore, it is of value to examine the impact of populist parties dominance in EU Member States at the micro-level. In that case, the redistributive policies instead of differentiating between class or sectoral conflicts, they tend to outline preferential policies within homogeneous groups of citizens.

Upon this analysis, Dr István Benczés calls that we move to an ideational definition of populism keeping a critical eye on the microeconomic impact of populist policies too. Contemporary right-wing populism although respectful of the national budget constraint, it has proven to completely ignore the institutional constraints of decision-making and to emphasise on short-term benefits hiding long-term costs.

4.2 How populist governments use the concept of constitutional identity to justify their authoritarian governance?

Zoltán SZENTE, Centre for Social Sciences Budapest

The event continued with **Dr Zoltán SZENTE**, Research Professor at the Institute for Legal Studies, Centre for Social Sciences Budapest, who discussed the constitutional policy of

populism and the attributes of populism that have been institutionalized. The comparative research on populism's impact on constitutional policies follows the constitutional changes of the EU member states and the UK between 2010 and 2020. There were identified 4 primary criteria of populism – preference of popular sovereignty and promotion of direct democracy; claim for authentic representation of people; extreme majorities and centralization of power. Regarding some secondary criteria that often occur, these were specified as follows – constitutional identity; crisis management; anti globalism, nativism; abusive legal borrowing; right restrictions and discrimination of minorities; clientelism, state capture. The findings of the research show that even in power, populism doesn't produce similar patterns of constitutional changes. Some characteristics emerge in non-populist systems too, certain features are not transformed into law and that constitutionalism in the most affected countries is rather authoritarian than populist.

4.3 Populist cultural policy: delegitimizing liberal democracy and undermining of the EU's positive image

Krzysztof KOWALSKI and Agnieszka SADECKA, Jagiellonian University Krakow

The next discussed topic was on populist cultural policy of delegitimizing liberal democracy and undermining the EU's positive image. **Dr Agnieszka Sadecka** from the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków presented a research based on interviews gathered in 2021 and in 2022 with head managers of cultural institutions in Poland and an analysis of cultural policies. The main conclusions of the research identified a neo-traditional turn in cultural policy, a focus on the nation and gradual disappearance of the EU dimensions from cultural programs, distribution of funds that is based on ideological criteria (festivals, events etc.) and less autonomy for directors of institutions. Based on the research, Dr Sadesca outlined four possible responses: Decentralization versus centralization – providing mixed funding for cultural institutions, direct funding from EU with simple and effective funding procedures; Transnationalism versus nationalism – tightening the connections between cultural institutions across Europe, developing joint curatorship and job shadowing programmes and recreating the “European University” model for cultural institutions; Expertise versus ideology – cultural institutions as part of a European knowledge-based society; Affirmation of truth versus relativization of truth—combating disinformation, fact checking and open source intelligence trainings; digital literacy and increased social media presence for educational purposes.

4.4 Populist information strategies, social media, and the commercialization of modern media

Giuliano BOBBA, University of Turin

Next on the event's agenda was **Dr. Giuliano Bobba**, Assistant Professor at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society in the University of Turin who introduced the topic "*Populist information strategies, social media, and the commercialization of modern media*". Dr Bobba presented the problem with the popularity of social media among politicians and mostly among populists. This is alarming because this encourages the spread of narratives discrediting democratic institutions, weakens checks and balances mechanisms, and bypasses the journalistic filter, making it difficult for citizens to distinguish information from communication. The research has shown that populist actors regularly post more than non-populist actors; that populist actors regularly get more engagement than non-populist actors and that users commenting on the posts of populist actors are more likely to use populist language than users commenting on the posts of non-populist actors. These findings lead also to some implications namely the normalization of the populist style in political communication and political views and also, the normalization of the populist message that dichotomises "us" versus "them", fostering the process of polarization of political opinions and behaviours between parties and voters. Dr Bobba stated that for possible solutions to be found joint and coordinated actions aimed at citizens, journalists, and politicians are needed such as media literacy for citizens, the development of a non-hostile communication manifesto for politicians, training sessions with journalists etc.

4.5 The minorities targeted by populist actors and their reactions

Umut KORKUT, Glasgow Caledonian University

Dr Umut Korkut from Glasgow Caledonian University gave another perspective on populism through the eyes of minorities that are targeted by populists' actors and their reactions. The Demos project is looking at how "the others", and "the outsiders", created by populist movements, are negotiating their identities facing this opposition. The situation indicates a mainstreaming of hate speech, with most targeted people from the gender and LGTB+ activists. Dr Korkut pointed out four available dissidence behaviours/strategies for the targets – stoic behaviour, self-censorship, emigrating or active resistance while stating that an active resistance of the informed is needed.

Dr Richard Mole, Professor of Political Sociology at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, carried on with the presentations, focussing on homophobia and populist politics in Poland. Limiting the definition of "people", populists aim to delegitimize oppositional

voices. At the same time, attacking nationalism as a whole is not advisable for activists. There is a need to differentiate “national in group” satisfaction – which is pro-sociality and intergroup tolerance – and “national collective narcissism” where the nation is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment.

At the end of the presentation, Dr Mole proposed several recommendations for activists such as not dismissing people’s nationalist feelings but emphasising the importance of national in-group satisfaction, emphasizing LGBTQ+ right as Polish, battling the idea that homosexuality is a “Western import”, incorporating national symbols into LGBTQ events and also underlining that homosexuality is not a choice – through the study of sexology.

4.6 The COVID crisis and populist reactions

Nicolas HUBÉ, University of Lorraine

The presentations of the second session continued with **Dr Nicolas Hubé** from the University of Lorraine, who took a deeper look at the relation between the Covid-19 crises and populist reactions. Although populists usually benefit from crises, the case with the particular Covid-19 crisis is different. To define a framework for the politicization of issues, the researchers defined 3 stages in which an issue is politicized. The first stage is the “Emergence” of a problem, where the problem is being named and brought to the political field. This gives a chance to political agents to earn a place as legitimate players in the crisis-solving process. The second phase is “Confrontation” where the action is “blaming” and at the end, there is a “Managing” phase where political agents give issue-specific solutions.

The main findings and implications for democracies have shown that in the first Covid-crisis phase, populist actors had no policy ownership on the issue. The populist actor’s leaders in charge have been challenged to perform as effective rulers and the populists in the oppositions were lacking “populist messages” and instead were overtaken by extra-parliamentary movements such as anti-vax, conspiracy theories etc.

Regarding the possible solutions for this systematic problem, the researchers again advise for a holistic approach through media literacy, training for journalists and non-hostile communications.

4.7 Anti-vax and other emerging issues

Bruce EDMONDS, Manchester Metropolitan University

The final presentation of session 2 was dedicated to anti-vax and other emerging issues, and it was conducted by **Dr Bruce Edmonds** from Manchester Metropolitan University. During a crisis the views of fringe groups (anti-vax, extinction rebellion etc) come close to people, who tend to believe what confirms their own status, emotions, beliefs and identity. The research in PaCE has

shown that it is worth rebutting any factually incorrect claims even if it does not feel like this has an impact and the messages can be better received if they come from people in their own communities than by authorities.

Dr. Heinisch Reinhard K., Professor of Comparative Austrian Politics in the Department of Political Science at the University of Salzburg, joined in the conversation, sharing some background of the research. The key takeaways are that in the Covid-19 dimensions, the role of emotions and anxiety is crucial. There is a resentment of the elite and mistrust in those in power and in the medical experts, the experience of the pandemic as a group experience and lastly there is a diffusion of alternative messages. The main findings of the research are that experts are crucial in motivation of the vaccination, the most preferred party has also a role in the vaccination rate and finally when it comes to compulsory vaccination, being idiotically on the left straitened the beliefs in vaccination and being ideologically on the right is weakening the beliefs in vaccination. Dr Edmond finished his presentation by giving an example of populist adjacent movements, namely QAnon, pointing out the connection between conspiracy theories and populism in terms of beliefs about authorities and the Manichean worldview. Also, populism is similar to participating in conspiracy theories, because it is also triggered by background conditions and triggers, and have an emotional content.

5. SCENARIOS FOR REMEDIAL ACTIONS

5.1 Future scenarios and how to deal with the threat of right-wing populism in each of them?

Vello Pettai, University of Tartu, PROREBEL

Mathew Hall, Trilateral research, PaCE

The opening topic in the third session was on the foresight scenarios and more specifically, on how to deal with the threat of right-wing populism. Professor **Dr Vello Pettai** from the University of Tartu introduced an analytical system for mapping out possible futures within a certain domain or environment in order to reflect on possible consequences or courses of action under different eventualities. He pointed out that the scenarios cannot predict the future but they are a tool for critical thinking, discussion and interaction. The conclusions of the exogenous approach are that global trends clearly stymie, but do not suppress populist politics or sentiment; populisms that are more entrenched may even gain from further global change, and the populist public is not easily deterred or swayed by global crises, especially where deeper cultural and economic dimensions of populism have become rooted.

The second presenter of this topic, **Dr Mathew Hall** talked about the PaCE's work on scenarios within the configurations of populism. The conclusion of his endogenous approach is that as right-wing populism mounts in a country, there are interactive effects vis-à-vis other democratic institutions. The negative effects are erosion of minority rights, the polarization of public discourse, exclusionary politics, degradation of institutions, and mistrust of authorities.

5.2 The role of deliberative policy making in countering populism

Robert Bjarnason, Citizens Foundation, PaCE

The event continued with **Robert Bjarnason** from the Citizens Foundation, one of the PaCE's partners, who talked about the role of deliberative policymaking in countering populism. He made an introduction to the PaCE's Dashboard, which allows revealing relative trends between different topics driving the discourse regarding populism, nativism and public engagement. His research work included the trends over the period from 2014 to 2020, and the main results are that the decades of increased globalization lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and that more than doubled the real wealth of the top 1%. Unfortunately, these gains were not

shared by the middle class, who saw their wealth stagnant or in decline. At the end of his presentation, Mr. Bjarnason concluded that citizen's engagement and democratic innovation are one of the components that can help us to have a more stable democratic system going forward.

5.3 Why and how civic education can be useful in countering populism?

Egle Butkeviciene, Kaunas University of Technology,

Agnieszka Sadecka, University in Krakow

The third topic in the session was, focused on the question of why and how Civic Education can be useful in countering populism. The presentation started with **Dr Egle Butkeviciene** from Kaunas University of Technology who introduced her research work on the role of schools in enhancing democratic efficacy and the ability of civic education to be an effective tool for countering populism. She started from the hypothesis that the national level policies related to civic education have an effect on internal and external political efficacy, political interest, political participation and on the support for democratic values like equality, tolerance, and autonomy of youth. The study focused on youth of 14 European countries. The conclusions were that the most consistent effects on youth democratic political efficacy is exerted by the recommended minimum number of hours of compulsory citizenship education as a separate subject. In most cases, parental education level was associated positively with different aspects of democratic political efficacy of youth in Europe.

Dr Agnieszka Sadecka from University in Kraków joined in the conversation, sharing some background on her research on educational curricula in Poland and Hungary – countries where populists are in power since 2010 (HU) and 2015 (PL). Her conclusions were that before populists come to power, there was insufficient education about Europe and the EU. In Hungary, there is a shift towards centralization, less autonomy to school headmasters, and more nationalism, while in Poland some educational reforms have been made. The policy recommendations of Dr Sadecka included educating about Europe and EU via non-traditional channels like social media, workshops outside of schools, and internships at EU institutions. Moreover, she recommended working with NGOs to organise Europe days, the EU youth parliament and direct funding from the EU to underprivileged students.

At the end of the presentation, Dr Egle Butkeviciene posted two questions for discussion: What are the more innovative ways in teaching civic education? How the national level policies might be harmonized with international strategies and policies?

5.4 Communication strategies: how to reduce polarisation in discussion address the heterogeneity and complexity of different groups and communities

Bruce Edmonds, Manchester Metropolitan University

The fourth topic in the last session focussed on communication strategies, on how to reduce polarization in the discussion, and on how to address the heterogeneity and complexity of different groups and communities. **Dr. Edmonds** started his presentation with a comic developed as part of the PaCE project, illustrating some characteristics and dangers of liberal politics, carefully sourced using quotes from real politicians and giving examples at the end. He pointed out that the debate about issues that involved conflicting interests can get polarized and unproductive. This is especially so in depersonalized forums like social media or professionalized groups. This polarization could be reduced by face-to-face discussions over a reasonable period where people can tell their stories. Making people feel heard and giving them agency is very important, together with communicating optimistic and inspiring narratives about democracy and Europe. He concluded that populist communication could be countered with liberal-democratic ideas.

6. ANNEX 1: AGENDA

Unmasking Populism: Modalities, Scenarios, and Responses to a Persistent Threat

AGENDA

Event moderated by: Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director of the European Citizen Action Service

13:00 – 13:10 Welcome

Irene Norstedt, Director of the People Directorate, DG R&I, European Commission

13:10 – 14:05 Demand and drivers for populism: general and specific socio-political drivers of popular support

- The role of economic problems in driving support for populism (POPREBEL, DEMOS, and PACE)
- Socio-cultural factors behind populism: nationalism and religion (POPREBEL)
- A focus on competent government and not ignoring sections of the electorate in face of populist challenge (PaCE)
- Individual level variables: emotions, political knowledge, information, and values (DEMOS, POPREBEL)

Q&A with the participants

14:05 – 15:45 Socioeconomic, political, and cultural implications of populism

- Economic policy of populist governments (POPREBEL)
- How populist governments use the concept of constitutional identity to justify their authoritarian governance? (DEMOS)
- Populist cultural policy: delegitimizing liberal democracy and undermining of the EU's positive image (POPREBEL)
- Populist information strategies, social media, and the commercialization of modern media (DEMOS and POPREBEL)
- The minorities targeted by populist actors and their reactions (DEMOS and POPREBEL)
- The COVID crisis and populist reactions (DEMOS)
- Anti-vaxx and other emerging issues (PaCE)

Q&A with the participants

15:45 – 16:00 Break

16:00 – 17:00 Scenarios for remedial actions

- Future scenarios and how to deal with the threat of right-wing populism in each of them? (POPREBEL)
- The role of deliberative policy making in countering populism (PaCE)
- Why and how civic education can be useful in countering populism? (DEMOS, PaCE, POPREBEL)
- Communication strategies: how to reduce polarisation in discussion address the heterogeneity and complexity of different groups and communities (PaCE)

Q&A and concluding remarks