

spotlight europe

2014/02 — May 2014

The Populist Networks

Isabell Hoffmann

Bertelsmann Stiftung, Isabell.Hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

In 2013, 73 percent of the population of the European Union used the internet. And the number of users is still going up. In the run up to the European elections, we are led to ask a number of crucial questions: How do anti-European populists market themselves on the internet? Are they opinion leaders of the web community? Turns out they're not. The Pro-Europeans are strong. We'll explain why and what to do to make them even stronger.

spotlight europe # 2014/02

A growing number of people are beginning to reject traditional voting patterns and to decide at short notice which party they are going to vote for. As a result two factors are becoming increasingly important: The final leg of the campaign and the location where it takes place. Simultaneously the internet is gaining in importance as a source of information. If we assume that populist parties and movements have restricted access to the traditional media, we will perhaps come to the conclusion that they are making greater use of the internet in order to get their message across. Is that correct? And does their hatred of the common enemy actually motivate them to team up and to set up links, both at home and with people in other countries? What role do they play in “national” debates that are conducted online? Is this a place where they are of central importance, something that is not the case

in the traditional media? And is that the reason why they are opinion leaders?

In order to come up with some answers to these questions we devised a kind of internet magnetic resonance tomography or MRT. These charts show us things that are normally invisible, namely that part of the internet which disseminates populist and anti-European content, and the level of interaction between the various websites, blogs, forums, etc. By measuring and visualizing their connections and interaction, we can begin to understand who is talking to whom, who is spurring on the debate, and the isolation or integration of the various actors. We have analyzed German, French, British, Dutch, Italian and Polish networks. And for purposes of comparison we have also examined pro-European networks in Germany and France.

When we look at the charts, it is important to remember that they are not about left or right, or north and south. The basic idea is the concept of centrality. In a network the latter has a bearing on the number of links, the level of activity, and the extent of its influence. At the start of our investigation we identified 20 websites in every country which disseminate populist and anti-European content. We came to the conclusion that three criteria are of crucial importance: attitudes to the European Union, attitudes to the euro, and attitudes to the Schengen Agreement.

All in all we looked at 1,638 websites. Of these 988 are eurosceptical. However, they are distributed across the six countries covered by the survey, whereas the 650 which are in favour of integration were found in the German-speaking and French-speaking nets.

We have tried to use terminology in a consistent way. Anyone who writes about this subject quickly comes up against the problem of how to define certain things and ideas. Making subtle distinctions between anti-European, europhobic, eurosceptic and eurocritical is rather laborious and reader-unfriendly, and in our context does not get us very far. The crucial feature as far as we are concerned is whether a discourse is conducted in a constructive or a destructive manner. Those who are looking for solutions within the EU are being constructive. Those who want to get rid of the euro, to get rid of the Schengen Agreement and/or to get rid of the EU itself are certainly not being very constructive.

Principal results

» Despite public announcements about proposals for cooperation, there are hardly any links between the anti-European movements in the countries covered in the survey.

» In the final analysis the anti-European parties also keep themselves to themselves within the nation-states. It is true that they have their own networks, but these are largely isolated. The big exception is the *United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)* in Britain.

» In France the *Front National (FN)* is the most important anti-European actor. But there are also people in public life who personify anti-European attitudes and are very visible both online and offline. However, they never allude to the *FN* or to one of its representatives, and in other ways are not close to the *FN* in political terms.

» In Germany the European policy network (both for and against) is not as dense as in the other states included in this study. However, it is more closely linked with those of its European neighbours than the other networks. For this reason it is of central importance in the European debate. The pro-Europeans are clearly in the majority, whereas the anti-Europeans are weak and isolated. The *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* however has surprisingly close links with the German online media landscape.

» The Italian network is very fragmented. Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement form the largest network. Thus at least 1.44 million people follow Beppe Grillo's comments on Twitter. However, there are no links to other political actors.

» In the Netherlands quite a few parties fight for eurocritical positions. Civil society is absent though in this network. So are online media.

» The most active anti-European actor in the Polish internet is *Nowa Prawica*, the Congress of the New Right. *Nowa Prawica* is a party that was founded in 2011 as a result of the amalgamation of two far-right parties. It is noticeable that it has close links with *Ruch Narodowy*, a radical right-wing party.

» In contrast to the anti-Europeans the pro-Europeans can conduct debates in a transnational open space. There is a pan-European public sphere on the internet. This may not be as large as the national public spheres, but it exists. However, the European policy network is dominated by political parties and institutions. Civil society continues to be rather weak.

1,638 European political websites

In Germany and France, with pro- and anti-European content;
in the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

European Networks

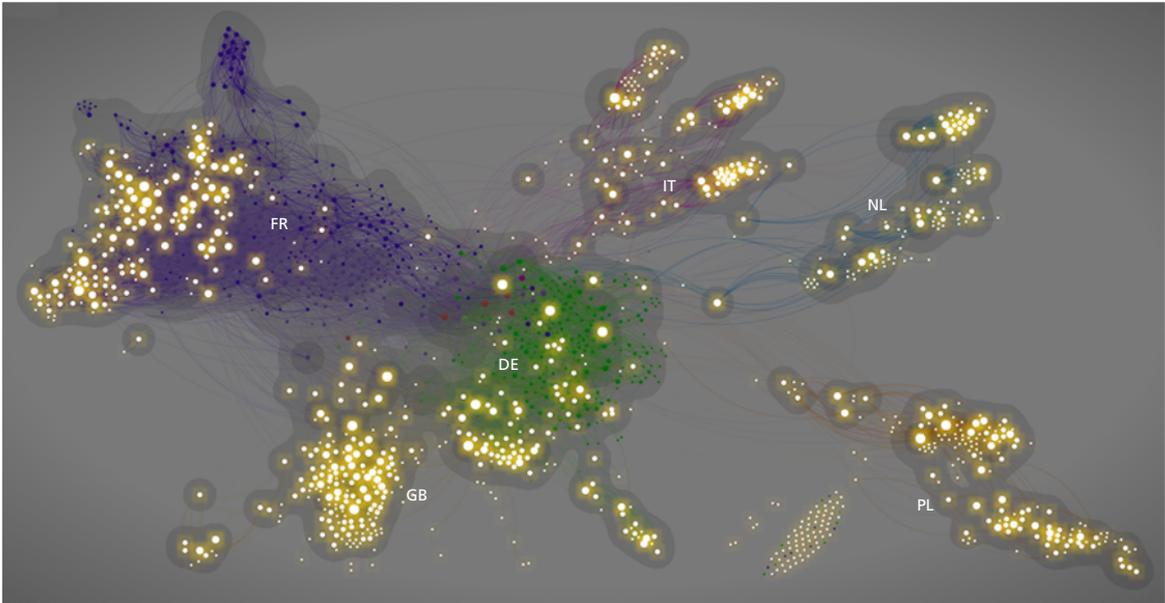
Europe's virtual public sphere is just as fragmented in linguistic and national terms as the traditional one. This is especially true of the networks of the populist parties. Whilst it is a fact that their well-known leaders have kept themselves in the news in recent months by travelling around, meeting various people, and making proposals for cooperation, our charts show that there is no interaction whatsoever and no links between the parties. It is true that we have been able to identify a total of 988 eurosceptical websites in the countries included in this study, but on all of the 988 we could find only four links. The Italian activist website *bastaeuro.it* refers once to the French *Front National* and once to the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom). And the British *UKIP* is twice cited on French debating websites (*La lettre volée* and *Decap'actu*. The first is a blog, and the second a news website). There is also no such thing as a pan-European network of anti-European populists on the internet. There is no central marketplace or workshop for ideas. It is perhaps even more surprising to discover that the

movements are very isolated, not only on the European stage, but also within their national borders. Even parties such as the French *Front National* which have been in existence for a long time, and the representatives of which have advanced in their countries to become europhobia opinion leaders, have not been rewarded with links and interconnectedness. It may well be true that 23 percent of the young people in France could see themselves vote for the *FN*, and that Marine Le Pen regularly appears on radio and television shows, but that does not mean that people refer to her on political internet websites in France, that she is at the forefront of the online debate, or that the websites of her party or those of her representatives and sympathizers are linked with other organizations.

The pro-European network is not only numerically stronger (658 as opposed to 251 in France and Germany). It is also very much interconnected. This shows not only that the links exist, but also that there is interaction between the pro-Europeans. They form a Europe-wide network in which they trade ideas, opinions, concepts and information, and thus, even if

988 websites with anti-European content

In Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland



Source: linkfluence

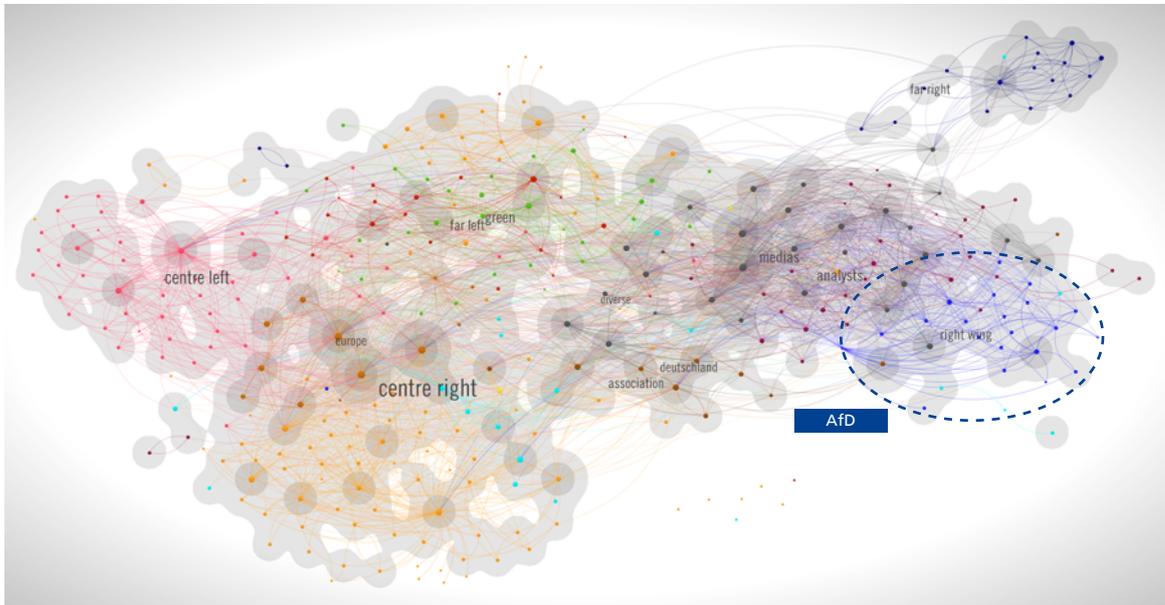
© Bertelsmann Stiftung

these are aligned along traditional lines of conflict, they are forging a shared vision and a common philosophy. The charts show very clearly that there is a lively European public sphere on the internet. That is a decisive factor, not only for those who are already participants in this network, but also for those who

want to find out more about European politics on the internet. The level of interconnectedness and the degree of exchange has an important influence on the status that is accorded to the websites by the various search engines, and thus enhances their visibility and accessibility in a very significant way.

Germany

349 websites with pro- and anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

National Networks

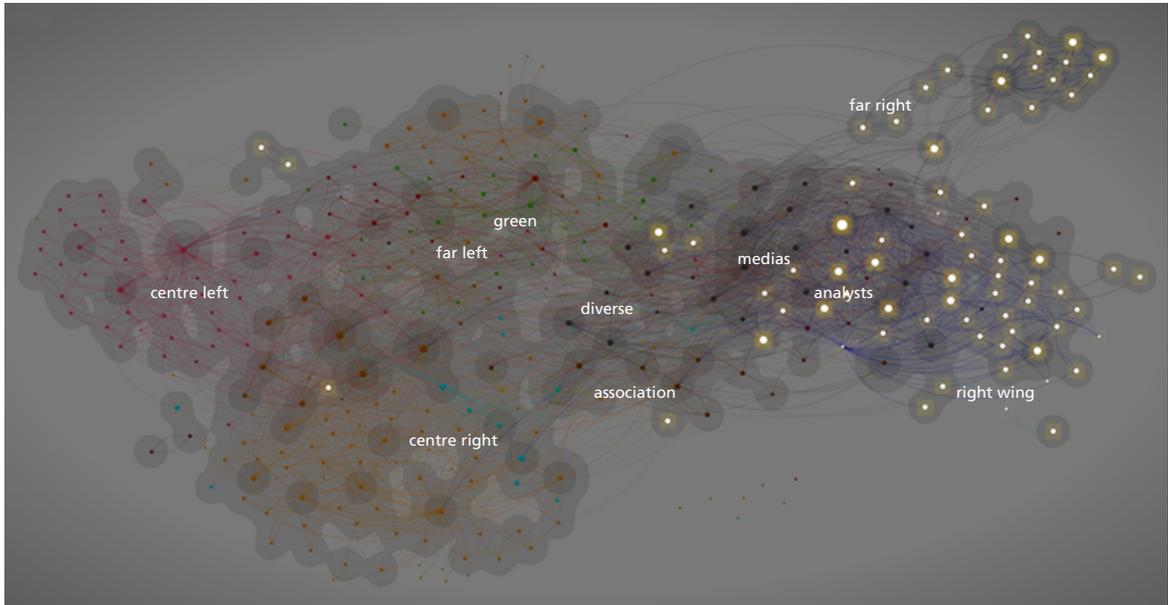
Germany – 80% integration friendly

Germany may be the largest country in the European Union, but its political network is relatively weak. A mere 349 websites are devoted to European policy content. Compare this with France, which, although it has fewer internet users, has a total of 573 websites. The political parties are very well represented in this lineup. To all intents and purposes the European policy network clusters around party websites and those of their deputies. Thus, as might have been expected, the network of the pro-Europeans is rather strong. They operate 276 out of 349 websites, which means that about 80 percent of all internet websites have integration-friendly views. Only 73 websites in Germany disseminate content that is opposed to integration. The *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* has the strongest anti-integration network, and the *Nationale Partei Deutschland (NPD)* has the second strongest. However, the *NPD* network, unlike that of the *AfD*, is largely isolated. It lies isolated on the upper right edge of the chart. The *AfD* lies slightly lower, and also on the right edge, but it is not as isolated. It has sur-

prisingly close links with the German online media landscape. No other party and indeed no other institution achieves such a high degree of interconnectedness with German media websites or lies so close to them on our chart as the *AfD*. The websites of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* play such an important role that on our chart they come up as an integral part of the eurocritical network. Every reader will have noticed that since the outbreak of the debt crisis *AfD* party members and sympathizers have made particularly intensive use of the online media comment columns and that it is also not a secret that *faz.net*, which for weeks gave its special sections on the euro crisis the title “Moving towards the Transfer Union,” became the publisher of choice for professors who were critical of the financial rescue policies and like-minded individuals. Go to Google and type in “Professors oppose euro faz.net,” and you will get an impression of just how many articles there are, and of the prevailing mood. The fact that *AfD* supporters and sympathizers first got to know each other and to organize themselves through media comment columns may perhaps explain their almost total absence from Twitter. Party leader and poster boy Bernd Lucke gave up using Twitter completely after the elections

Germany

73 websites with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

to the German Parliament. His last tweet was on 23 September 2013. At that point he was being followed by 4,314 readers. His party colleagues Frauke Petry, Hans-Olaf Henkel and Beatrix von Storch are being followed by no more than 894, 817 and 589 people who are curious to know what they have to say. In the European context this is next to nothing. The Twitter list of the most prominent German eurocritics starts off with the former *FDP* member of the German Parliament, Frank Schäffler. He is being followed by 8,051 readers. But in Italy Beppe Grillo sends his brief messages to 1.44 million people, in the Netherlands Geert Wilders reaches 323,000 people, in France Marine Le Pen has 280,000 followers, and in the United Kingdom Nigel Farage has 121,000.

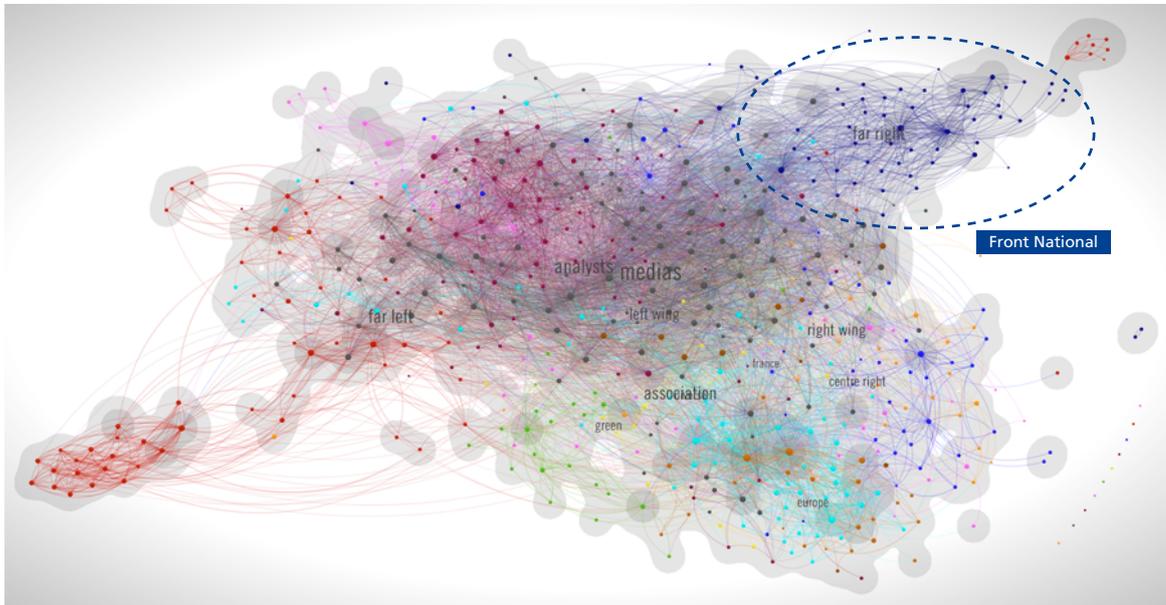
In the German European policy debate the *CSU* often plays a somewhat confusing role of its own, and this, especially for non-German observers, is rather difficult to decipher. On our chart its websites and those of its representatives are not deemed to be part of the eurocritical network. This may seem surprising when one thinks of the kind of commentary which has enabled Markus Söder, Alexander Dobrindt and Peter Gauweiler to keep themselves in the

public eye in recent years. On the one hand there is strong language. On the other hand there are the *CSU*'s party manifestos and political action, and in this context such heckling seems less important. Thus we cannot describe the *CSU* as an anti-European party. It has not called for the abolition of the euro, or for the abrogation of the Schengen Agreement. Nor does it want to dismantle the EU. However, it continues to play an ambiguous role. Its representatives are often loud and brash, and do not mince their words, and this tends in particular to shock European observers, who find it difficult to assess the precise meaning of their remarks in the context of German politics.

The absence of civil society in the public sphere of the German internet is truly dramatic. No more than 5.4 percent of the identified websites are operated by associations, networks or other civil society groups. If one decides to include the media websites, one arrives at 23 percent. This means that 77 percent of the German internet devoted to European policy is in the hands of political parties, party representatives, and large institutions.

France

573 websites with pro-and anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

France – Le Pen is not alone

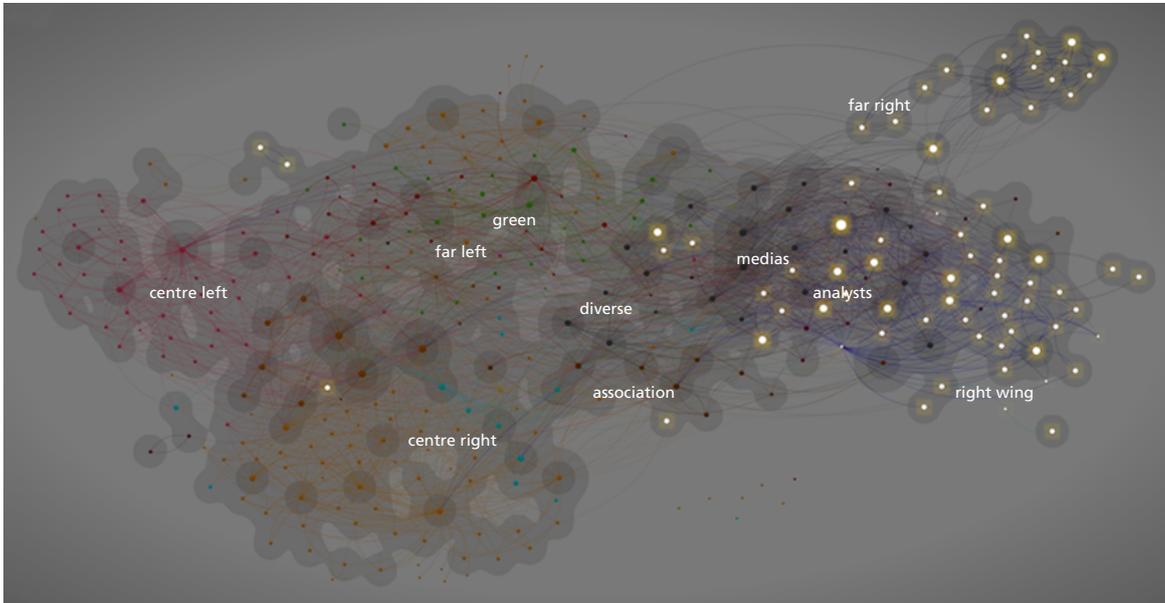
When it comes to politics, the French are more active on the internet than their German neighbours. We identified a total of 573 websites which play a role in the European policy debate. But there are not only more websites in purely quantitative terms. They are also far more closely linked. Whereas on the German chart it is still easy to see individual links, the links between the French websites weave a dense web. There are 178 anti-European websites, and they are all located on the top edge of the chart. The network of the *Front National (FN)* is rather large, but is located in a somewhat isolated position at the top right of the chart. The small anti-European parties *Mouvement républicain et citoyen (MRC)* and *Debout la République* are far better integrated.

The *MRC* is left-wing nationalist party which has called on the electorate to boycott the elections to the European Parliament. It was founded by the venerable French politician Jean-Pierre Chevènement. For many years Chevènement was a minister in various Socialist governments, and one of the comrades-in-arms of François Mitterrand, with whom he founded the *Parti*

Socialiste (PS). To this day he is a senator in the upper house of the French parliament. Thus he is a typical example of a very French phenomenon. A renegade ex-minister who now has his own small party to back him up, and is a familiar public figure with a great love for the “values of the republic,” which he or she considers to be irreconcilable with European integration. This kind of rejection of the EU can go hand in hand with left-wing or right-wing positions. But all these people share a nostalgia for the France of General de Gaulle. Christine Boutin – now *Force Vie*, formerly *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP)* – is one of them, and so is Nicolas Dupont-Aignan – now *Debout de la République*, formerly *UMP*. They are both very active on Twitter and have 63,500 and 58,600 followers. Critics such as Laurent Wauquiez and Henri Guaino (both *UMP*) or Jean-Luc Mélenchon (*Front de Gauche*) have even deeper roots in traditional parties. Wauquiez, who was Minister for European Affairs under Sarkozy, recently broke with the positions held by his party in a book entitled “Europe : il faut tout changer” (Europe. Everything must be changed). He would like to go back to the Europe of the six founding states, though he would try to replace Luxembourg with Spain, since Luxembourg is “a tax haven.”

Germany

73 websites with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

Wauquiez has a Twitter account which goes back to his time as a minister, and 130,000 followers. And he also has a website which has numerous visitors. And then there is MEP Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who, when it is all said and done, was able to attract the support of eleven percent of the electorate at the last presidential elections. He is both famous and notorious for his hard-hitting statements, and not so long ago he said on the *France 3* television channel: “The question is not whether France will have to leave the euro, but when and how that will happen.” In France 202,000 people read Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s news on Twitter. He makes regular appearances in all the media, and no one will bat an eyelid if one cites something that he has said. In the final analysis this European election campaign has reopened old wounds, and it harks back to the disagreements that surfaced in France during the Constitutional referendum and the Maastricht referendum. At the time the rift was apparent in all of the political parties. In this campaign only the *Parti socialiste* has remained calm.

On our chart Laurent Wauquiez and Jean-Luc Mélenchon are not as yet part of the anti-European network. They have only recently changed their positions, and it is not yet clear whether

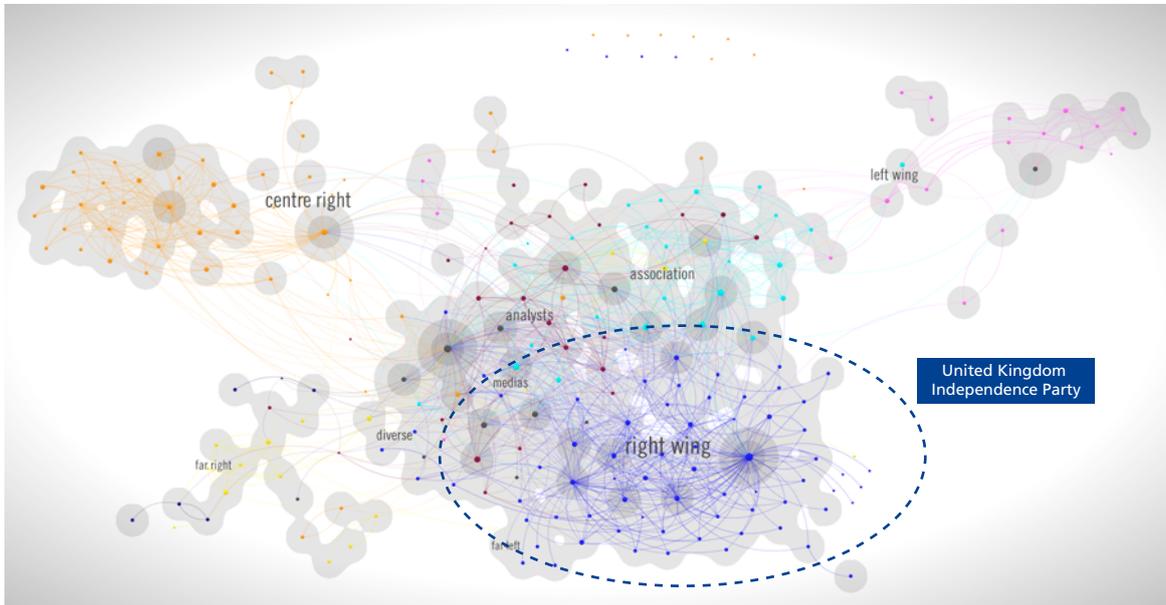
they have simply succumbed to election fever, or whether they will actually move on to some kind of political action.

Thus the success of Marine Le Pen is obvious. However, there is also her network, which is generally perceived to be dangerous. It continues to be isolated. She has not as yet managed to overcome the mistrust and condemnation that accumulated under her father. Throwing in one’s lot with Marine Le Pen and the *FN* is still a systemic risk. It is not as dangerous to cite Chevènement, Boutin or Dupont-Aignan, and there does not seem to be any risk whatsoever when it comes to Wauquiez and Mélenchon.

In contrast to other countries an anti-European stance is not a unique feature of one particular individual or of one political party. It is of course true that the vast majority of the members of the large parties in France is pro-European. This is also demonstrated by our charts. 67 percent of the websites are integration-friendly, and they are also in the centre of the chart, which means that they are central to the debate. Nevertheless there are a number of people (from a variety of political backgrounds) who have quite openly adopted eurosceptical positions.

Great Britain

235 websites with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

United Kingdom – UKIP's everywhere

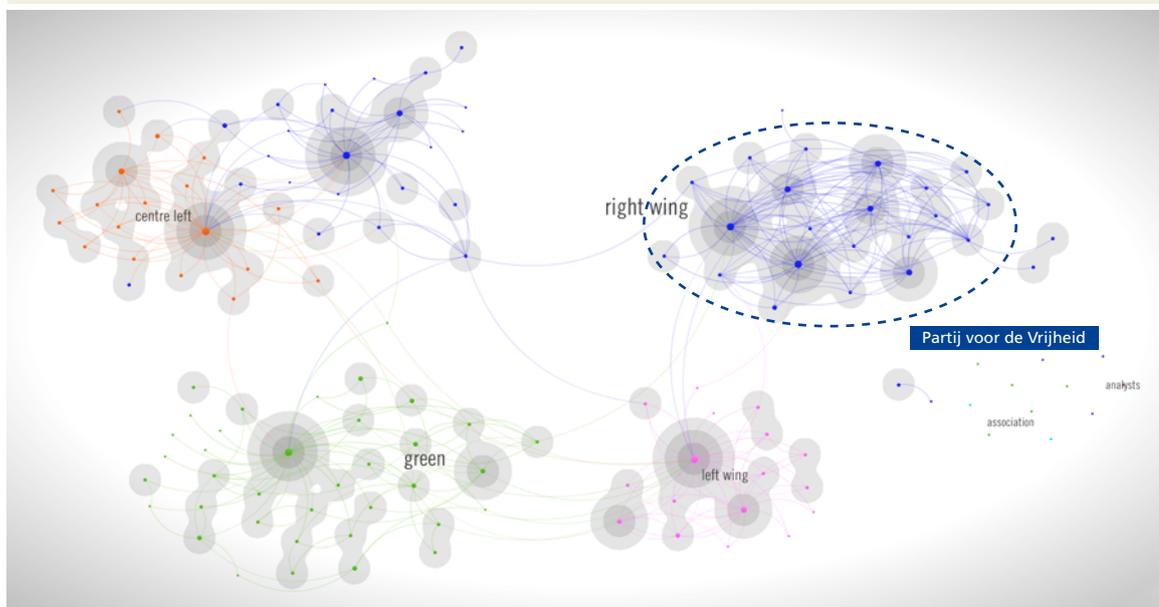
In England we scrutinized only the network of the eurocritics. Two things are especially noteworthy. The United Kingdom is the only country in which a traditional party is openly anti-European. However, the Conservatives (or Tories) are neither central to the internet debate, nor are they the opinion leaders. Their main weapon is their network, which is relatively isolated on the upper left edge of the chart. Only *conservatives.com* is still in touch with the centre. The real leader of the anti-European debate in Britain is the *United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)*. It is the only anti-integration party in our study that has managed to become an integral part of the mainstream. It is not only at the centre of the British debate. It also leads it. Anyone looking for information on or opinions about European integration in the British internet will end up with the *UKIP*. It has its own network, which is the largest and the one with the best links. And it also has links with all the other important actors. Whereas the various anti-European parties in the countries covered by this study do not on the whole keep in touch with their political rivals, the *UKIP* does at least have some rather basic links with

the Tories, the far-right *British National Party*, and the *English Democrats*. It is even in touch with left-wing anti-European parties such as the Socialists and the Communists. However, it is even more significant that it has close links with the media, analysts, societies and associations, and this means that an active section of civil society shares the ideas of the *UKIP* and openly disseminates them on the internet. This interconnectedness is the reason for their central position, and it is the crucial difference between what is happening in Britain and the other countries. Compare this with Marine Le Pen, who disseminates her anti-European views in a very visible manner. Moreover, her party plays an important role. But she is not the only politician of her kind in France, and certainly not the central point of reference. Nigel Farage and the *UKIP* are not the only ones either, but they are the central figures among British opponents of Europe.

All in all we were able to identify 235 websites on the British internet that were against integration. That is about 25 percent more than in France and almost 70 percent more than in Germany. Of the 235 websites 173 are party websites, and 62 are websites operated by the

Netherlands

134 websites with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

media and civil society, including websites such as *eureferendum.com*, *freenations.freeuk.com* and *openeurope.org.uk*. It does not come as much of a surprise that the websites of the *Telegraph* and the *Sun* are part of the insular anti-European network.

The Netherlands – civil society's absent

In the Netherlands we studied only the anti-European network. It is immediately apparent that the Dutch eurocritics are fragmented. They are located at the edge of the chart. The centre remains empty. Of the 134 websites that were identified, more than 90 percent can be assigned to political parties. There are hardly any websites operated by the traditional media, blogs, forums, associations or other civil society initiatives. The *Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)* is visible at the right upper edge of the chart. It has the largest network, but is otherwise very isolated. As was to be expected with a one-man party, the network revolves around the websites of the Freedom Party itself and the personal websites of Geert Wilders, its founder, head and only real representative. Geert Wilders has 323,000 followers

on Twitter. When all is said and done, that means that he has direct access to two percent of the population of the Netherlands.

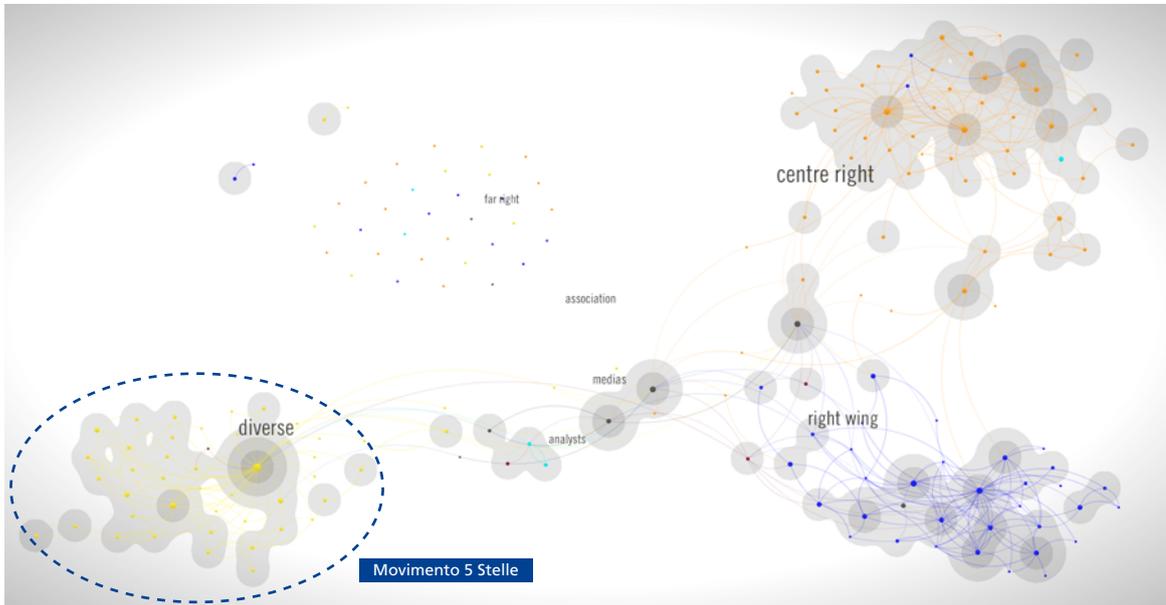
It is noticeable that many parties in the Netherlands hold anti-European views. Most of them are small parties which can get no more than a few seats in the Dutch parliament. But they come from all parts of the political spectrum. On the left of the spectrum are the Socialists, SP, and the Greens, *GroenLinks*. On the right of the spectrum are the conservative *ChristenUnie* and the *SGP*. These two parties are actually very close to each other on the chart. They maintain close links and are also nearest to the centre of the chart, even though they do not occupy it.

Italy – Against Rome, Berlin, Brussels

In the case of Italy we singled out only the populists who are opposed to European integration. In the process we identified three actors: the old-established inhabitants, the opportunists, and the rising stars. First of all there are the old-established inhabitants. *Legia Nord* has a resilient network consisting of party websites and websites which have some connection with the

Italy

184 websites with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

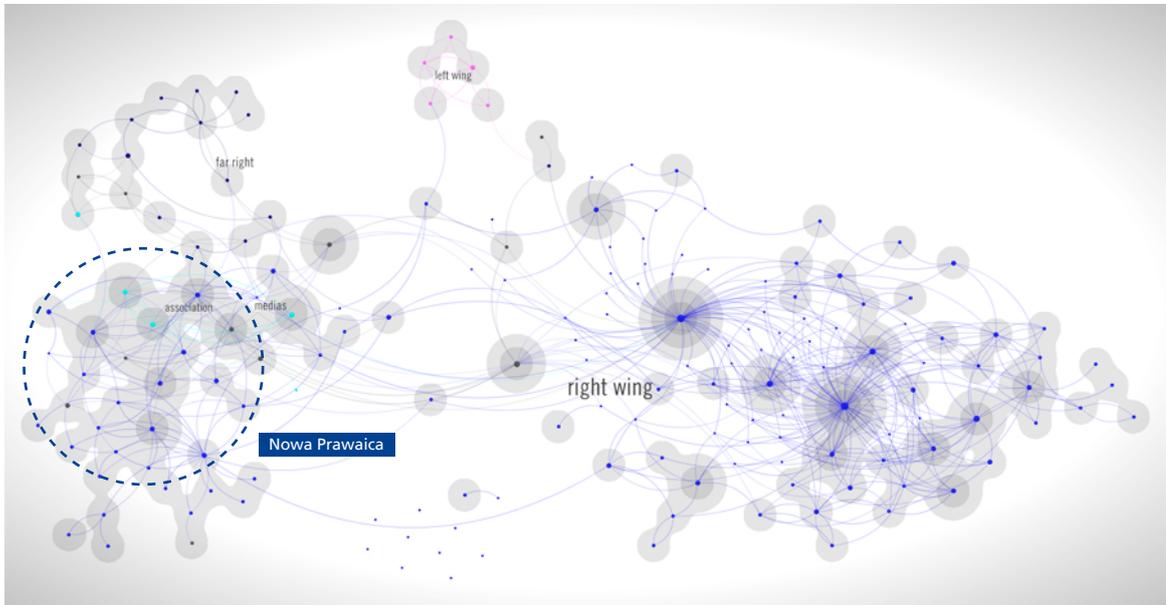
party. It is located on the bottom right edge of the chart and has a handful of links to like-minded media and to *Fratelli d'Italia*, a very small conservative party with anti-European aspirations but without any internet momentum. However, some of its members are rather active on Twitter. Giorgia Meloni has 130,000 followers, and her party colleague Gianni Alemanno has 65,800. Both served as ministers in one of the Berlusconi governments. The party has many ideas in common with *Legha Nord*. But it seems that *Legha Nord*'s time is past as well. During the Berlusconi years it came up with some very good election results (going by its standards), and now has a low (and stable) level of support. It is considered to be a party of simplistic slogans for simple minds. *Legha Nord*, which is opposed to migration and against integration, is a populist right-wing party of the old school. The opportunists are above them at the top on the right. Ever since it lost its majority and its leader and founding father, *Forza Italia*, Silvio Berlusconi's party, has discovered that it can benefit from whipping up anti-European sentiments. Although for many years *Forza Italia* was the party of government, its network is remarkably isolated. It is true that FI politi-

cians Lara Comi and Deborah Bergamini are doing quite well on Twitter, and have 19,900 and 10,900 followers, but when one compares this with the rising stars, *Forza Italia* cannot be taken seriously as a factor on the internet.

The rising stars are Beppe Grillo and *Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)*, which he founded. In the short time in which the movement has been in existence it has built up a very close-knit network. It is based on the party website and on Beppe Grillo's personal website. As in the case of the Dutch Party of Freedom, Grillo is of central importance and perhaps over-powerful in this young protest movement. Grillo's transformation from comedian to politician began with his stand against corruption, and his reputation grew rapidly at the height of the euro crisis. With the help of social networks in general and of Twitter in particular he started to surround himself with supporters. Grillo is the uncrowned king of the internet populists and has 1.44 million readers on Twitter. He disseminates a radical critique of the system. It is quite clear what he does not like: Rome, Berlin, and Brussels. However, what he likes continues to be rather nebulous. The slogans which one hears again and

Poland

174 websites with anti-European content



Source: linkfluence

© Bertelsmann Stiftung

again are ecology, transparency, and direct democracy. Observers say that he behaves like “a leader of a sect.” “We are young,” his blog tells us. “We have no structure, hierarchy, leader or secretaries. We do not take orders from anyone.” At the same time Grillo has imposed a strict code of conduct on his MPs and expects unquestioning loyalty. Thus they are not allowed to talk to journalists, and in particular they are not permitted to appear in talk shows. Those who refuse to comply with these instructions get their marching orders and are expelled. Hitherto Grillo has not been a candidate for public office. However, in the Italian parliamentary elections in February 2013 his party came in second, and now has 109 of the 630 seats in the lower house. Grillo uses rather drastic language, and by and large he reaches people via the internet. The movement’s websites, blogs such as grillivenezia.org/wordpress, Twitter and a YouTube channel help him to evade the questions of the journalists. 100,137 people have subscribed to the channel and regularly receive the messages of *M5S*. Our chart reveals the isolation of the *M5S* deputies. On the bottom left edge they inhabit their own universe, and there are no links to the “system.”

Poland – Learning from UKIP

All the anti-European parties in Poland come from the right of the political spectrum. The largest network is that of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) Party (*PiS*). In the period after 2000 the Kasczinsky twins were its leaders, and it controlled all the positions of power in Poland. Appropriately its network occupies a prominent position between the centre and the right on our populists’ chart. Not much higher is the very small network of *Solidarna Polska* of Jacek Kurski, who was once considered to be a *PiS* wunderkind. He fell into disfavour and then started out on his own. Since then he has found it rather difficult, both in elections and on the internet, to repeat his former triumphs. In the middle and above this is the only party which belongs to the left-wing spectrum. *Samoobrona* collapsed after the death of its founder. It now exists merely in legal and organizational terms. The most active network is on the left bottom edge of the chart, though this is not a sign that is left-wing. *Nowa Prawica*, or *Congress of the New Right* (*CNR*), is the surprise of this EP campaign. The Congress of the New Right came into being in 2011 as a result of the amalgamation of two smaller parties masterminded

by Janusz Korwin-Mikke. The party unites a number of different groups, and includes monarchists, libertarians and conservatives. Janusz Korwin-Mikke is a familiar figure in Polish politics, though hitherto the parties he has led have never managed to get over the five percent barrier. He has never managed to get a seat in parliament. However, on this occasion the forecasts say that he will get seven percent of the votes. And 22,900 Poles follow him on Twitter. The Nowa Prawica election manifesto contains a promise: “We are the only party that speaks out in a consistent and uncompromising way against the EU. We are fighting for a reduction of the EU until it becomes a free trade zone.” The manifesto also states that in the EP it will take its bearings from the British *UKIP*.

The *CNR* network may be small, but it is growing at a rapid rate, and it is in touch with other organizations. There are particularly close links with *Ruch Narodowy*, a far-right party whose ideology is based on concepts such as nation, tradition, family, sovereignty and splendid isolation.

However, such splendid isolation does not mean that the party is in favour of the abrogation of the Schengen Agreement. None of the anti-European parties in Poland is opposed to Schengen. That is a unique feature of Polish politics, and here the large Law and Justice party is no exception. Currently it is slightly ahead of Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s Citizens’ Platform in the polls. That has often been the case in recent years. But Tusk has always managed to come out on top. Jaroslaw Kasczinsky is slowly but surely beginning to feel that it is time to score another success. There are already rumours about a power struggle behind the scenes.

Fragmented and isolated

When it comes to the European internet, the anti-Europeans are both fragmented and isolated. The linguistic and ideological barriers seem to be greater than their common foe and bogeyman. Despite all the announcements and the toing and froing of their leaders in recent months, we have not been able to prove that there is

any kind of connection between them, or that they have joined forces on the internet. The audience which the *Le Pens*, *Wilders*, *Farages* and *Grillos* of this part of the world are trying to reach is that of the nation-state. This ties in with the results of the research undertaken by Nathalie Brack and Olivier Costa “The Role(s) of the Eurosceptic MEPs” devoted to the parliamentary work of their MEPs. They show that to all intents and purposes they were conspicuous by their absence and their political inactivity. As far as they are concerned, the European Union is no more than a means to an end, which is to come to power in the nation-states. As long as they cannot win a seat in the national institutions, they will make use of the European Parliament and the visibility and power which it gives to them in functional and structural terms for their own purposes, and not in order to do something for the electorate. With wry British humour Nigel Farage frequently points to this absurd aspect of the European political system. It is discreet enough to enable people to denounce it as opaque and undemocratic, but open enough to enable those who wish to abolish it to exploit its resources.

So how are the anti-European populists spreading their views in the various societies? Several patterns seem to be emerging. For example, Marine Le Pen manages to project her anti-integration views deep into French public life, and yet she remains isolated in systemic terms. Other people are disseminating similar ideas, but they would never refer to her or to her party. One could in fact describe Marine Le Pen as a hidden opinion leader. A wave soars up in front of her, but it is repeatedly broken by others. Briton Nigel Farage rides the wave himself. No other anti-European populist has managed to set up such a tightly-knit network. No other country can rival Britain’s active anti-European internet community. And as far as this civilian internet community is concerned, the points of reference are Nigel Farage and the *UKIP*. Important leading media are not afraid to mention him. In fact, they have turned him into the central representative of anti-European sentiment. In Germany, on the other hand, a large bloc of pro-European parties and institutions is of central importance. The populist networks are weak and isolated. The *AfD* is

the only one which has managed to establish a relationship with the German online media. They amplify attitudes that are not in fact very popular. The Dutch *Party of Freedom* and the *5 Star Movement* in Italy function on the basis of personality cults. Their networks may actually be strong, but they are isolated. It is difficult to say what would become of them without Wilders and Grillo. It remains to be seen whether the Polish election surprise is more than a flash in the pan. The party's close connections with the far-right spectrum does not portend well for the future. Another bout of radicalization cannot be excluded.

The pro-Europeans' most important task is to strengthen civil society on the internet. There is no dearth of ideas and initiatives. In the run-up to the elections new websites are appearing on a daily basis. They are devoted to games, travel, diaries, monitors, and films, and you can look at them, you can participate, you can pass them on to other people. On the whole it is

young Europeans who want to support Europe, who switch on their computers and get down to it. But they often find it difficult to keep their heads above water. They do not necessarily need money. What they need is recognition through networking. Every large government institution (be it national or European) and every party should create an email address for civil society projects and other initiatives that are interested in networking. A member of the publicity department should be given the task of checking the applications and creating appropriate links. It is important to be generous and unbureaucratic. Thus it is standard practice to reject all responsibility for the content of linked websites by issuing a disclaimer. The question of how one deals with the legal risks of such links was resolved a long time ago. With few resources, low expenditure and little risk the large institutions can help committed Europeans to stand up and be counted, and to go on to win the battle with the populists and their networks. ■

Responsible:

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Isabell Hoffmann
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Telephone +49 5241 81 81313

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme
joachim.vannahme@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Telephone +49 5241 81 81421

Latest editions:

spotlight europe # 2014/01
North Africa – Crisis and Consensus
Christian-P. Hanelt

spotlight europe # 2013/05
Unlocking the Lifeline of Talent
Christal Morehouse & Matthias Busse

spotlight europe # 2013/04
The Changing Face of North Africa.
An Opportunity for and with Europe
Christian-P. Hanelt & Sven Behrendt