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# Extreme poverty and human rights

## Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 53/10.

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# Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter

## Far-right populism and the future of social protection

*Summary*

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, examines the future of social protection against the background of the rise of far-right populism across world regions. Highlighting the transformation of social protection, which has resulted in a growing distrust towards institutions, he explains how this feeds the rise of far-right populism, which thrives on economic insecurity and fear of status loss. He shows how far-right populism sows division, exploiting the discontent towards the incumbent elites as a pretext for dismantling welfare, thus serving the interests of the privileged; or promoting welfare chauvinism, which reserves social protection for the in-group and the so-called "deserving poor" – the exact opposite of treating social protection as a human right. The Special Rapporteur concludes by explaining why rights-based social protection should be championed as a bulwark against the rise of authoritarian populism.

# I. Introduction

1. Democracy is under threat. In all world regions, recent years have seen the rise of far-right populist parties, which seek to capture democracy. Once in power, they attack the independence of the courts and the media; they restrict civic space; they dismiss political opponents as traitors to the country or as "anti-patriotic"; and they bypass parliaments, in order to consolidate power.[1]

2. Far-right populists appeal to a growing share of voters, by combining anti-elite sentiment with an "us" against "them" mentality, positioning themselves as defending the in-group against the out-group, and by attacking feminism and women's rights. This messaging is particularly attractive to voters who fear losing their status and feel threatened by cultural and economic change. It resonates especially deeply with men who face economic insecurity and live in regions that are left behind.

3. In fulfilling his mandate to assess progress in the fight against poverty, the Special Rapporteur cannot ignore this wave of far-right populism. To a large extent, it is precisely because people feel abandoned by the State, and betrayed by mainstream politicians, that they are tempted to believe in the promises of the far right. Yet, the ascent to power of the far right, whether it is driven by a libertarian agenda intent on dismantling public services or by a nationalist agenda focused on exclusion, leads to a pernicious form of welfare chauvinism that excludes the outcasts: migrants and the "undeserving poor". What is now needed to stem the tide is social protection that unites rather than divides, and that protects rather than punishes: this is what rights-based social protection means.

# II. The punitive welfare State

4. The recent evolution in social protection itself may explain the growing distrust towards the State and mainstream political parties. Indeed, the submissions received in preparation of the present report highlighted the emergence of a welfare dystopia, marked by increased surveillance, social control and welfare paternalism; a system of social protection in which vulnerable populations are monitored and treated as subjects to be "corrected" rather than supported. Three major areas of concern emerged.

## A. The activation of welfare

5. The first area of concern is the rise of activation policies, sometimes described as a shift from "welfare" to "workfare". Social assistance is increasingly conditional upon the beneficiary actively seeking work, and the levels and especially the duration of unemployment benefits are drastically lowered in order to incentivize jobseekers to actively seek work. While the support provided to jobseekers in the form of individual counselling by public employment agencies has often been expanded (though sometimes outsourced to private employment agencies chosen on a competitive basis), the threat of sanctions has also intensified. In a number of welfare systems, failure to accept a job offer, or refusal to attend training programmes or job search assistance sessions, results in a temporary or permanent loss of benefits.[2]

[1] Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[2] Olivier De Schutter, "Welfare State reform and social rights", *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (June 2015), pp. 123–162.

6. This trend is widespread. In France, the minimum income scheme (revenu de solidarité active) has included since 2024 a requirement that beneficiaries perform at least 15 hours per week of activities,[3] despite strong reservations expressed by the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights[4] and the National Council for Policies to Combat Poverty and Exclusion,[5] which fear that this requirement may increase institutional abuse. In the United Kingdom, job-search requirements were a major part of the introduction in 2012 of Universal Credit, which brought together six previously separate means-tested benefits into a single programme and allows the Department for Work and Pensions to make deductions from social security payments for claimants who fail to meet their job-seeking obligations.[6]

7. In Germany, provision of citizen's income (Bürgergeld) – a benefit jobseekers can claim at the end of their period of eligibility for the primary unemployment benefit – is conditional upon accepting any "suitable" job proposed by the Job Centre and on complying with a duty to attend appointments and to report any change of circumstances.[7] In March 2024, the possibility of "total sanctions" was reintroduced, allowing authorities to withhold up to 100 per cent of benefits for two months if a claimant fails to comply with job-seeking obligations, although it allows for discretion in cases of "exceptional hardship" (außergewöhnliche Härte).[8]

8. While the introduction of conditionalities in unemployment and social assistance schemes does seem to accelerate the transition from welfare to employment,[9] it can also lead to discriminatory practices by social services, which tend to impose sanctions on those most in need of support in particular. In the United Kingdom, it was found that sanctions were disproportionately imposed on claimants with limited work experience and qualifications, and/or facing practical barriers to work (e.g. not having access to a car). As in many countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), young claimants, those with large families and individuals belonging to Black and minority ethnic groups were at heightened risk.[10]

9. The imposition of work search-related conditionalities increases the vulnerability of already marginalized populations and heightens stigma for claimants. It also can lead to adverse mental health impacts and alienation from social assistance programmes to the point where eligible individuals choose not to take up those benefits – two developments the Special Rapporteur has documented in depth.[11] In the United Kingdom, the introduction since 2010 of programmes focused on caseload reduction and swift job entry has had limited impacts on employment, but has worsened depression and anxiety, particularly of parents of preschool children, due to the increased stress associated with the combination of childcare and pressure to start

[3] Law No. 2023-1196 of 18 December 2023 on full employment.

[4] See statement by the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, "Loi pour le plein emploi : l'obligation d'heures d'activité en contrepartie du RSA porte atteinte aux droits humains" (19 December 2024).

[5] See opinion issued by the National Council for Policies to Combat Poverty and Exclusion, "Loi pour le plein emploi : pour une sécurisation des droits et des ressources des allocataires du RSA" (March 2025).

[6] United Kingdom, Department for Work and Pensions, "Universal Credit and your claimant commitment" (accessed on 13 February 2025).

[7] Germany, Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, "Citizen's benefits: basic income support for jobseekers – Book II of the Social Code (SGB II), Questions and answers", January 2023.

[8] Germany, Book II of the Social Code (SGB II), sections 31, 31(a) and 31(b), page 13, para. 4.4.

[9] Gerard van den Berg, Bas van der Klaauw and Jan van Ours, "Punitive sanctions and the transition rate from welfare to work", *Journal of Labor Economics,* vol. 22, No. 1 (January 2004), pp. 211–241.

[10] See https://martin-evans.org/assets/files/JRFsanctions.pdf.

[11] See A/79/162, paras. 30–32; and A/HRC/50/38, paras. 54–58. See also Sarah Baird, Craig McIntosh and Berk Özler, "Cash or condition? Evidence from a cash transfer experiment", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 126, No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 1709–1753.

working.[12] Welfare-to-work policies have also been found to push beneficiaries into poor-quality jobs, providing little income security and limited work-life balance. "Progress" is narrowly defined as an increase in the number of hours worked or earnings, rather than as an improvement in job satisfaction, security or development. Workers find themselves caught in a "bad jobs trap", compelled to accept any job under threat of sanctions, with limited ability to refuse or to seek training.[13]

10. Moreover, such activation of welfare leads to increased monitoring of recipients, to ensure that they comply with the conditions. As highlighted recently by a participatory research study in Switzerland,[14] welfare gradually becomes punitive. It disciplines beneficiaries into certain forms of behaviour,[15] and reflects a paternalistic judgment of certain lifestyles,[16] often stigmatizing recipients.[17] While people should be able to combine employment with family and personal life, and be provided with adequate welfare protections to avoid them being forced into unsuitable work or made vulnerable due to care responsibilities or life events, this "work-life-welfare" balance is disrupted, as more time has to be invested in the search for work, including for the working poor in precarious jobs, to whom job search requirements are now being extended.[18]

11. Relying on International Labour Organization (ILO) standards,[19] the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations confirmed that a jobseeker may only be required to accept jobs that provide "suitable employment" when facing the threat of losing unemployment benefits. What constitutes "suitable employment" is defined in article 21, paragraph 2, of the Employment Promotion and Protection against Unemployment Convention, 1988 (No. 168). The Committee has clarified that whether a job is "suitable" or not will depend on the commuting time from the jobseeker's home to the place of employment (considering available means of transport and the total time spent away from home);[20] on the level of remuneration proposed (a job cannot be deemed suitable if the remuneration offered is lower than what the jobseeker could reasonably expect);[21] and on whether the job proposed corresponds to the jobseeker's skills, qualifications, acquired experience and length of service in their previous occupation (at least during the minimum protection

[12] Marcia Gibson and others, "Welfare-to-work interventions and their effects on the mental and physical health of lone parents and their children", *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2017, Issue 8, article No. CD009820.

[13] Katy Jones, Sharon Wright and Lisa Scullion, "The impact of welfare conditionality on experiences of job quality", *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 38, No. 6 (December 2024), pp. 1658–1679.

[14] ATD Quart Monde Suisse, *Rapports entre institutions, société et personnes vivant dans la pauvreté en Suisse : une expérience de violence qui continue* (2023).

[15] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York, Vintage Books, 1971).

[16] Emma Saunders-Hastings, "Welfare paternalism and objections from equality", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (December 2024), pp. 1–26.

[17] Sharon Wright, Del Roy Fletcher and Alasdair B. R. Stewart, "Punitive benefit sanctions, welfare conditionality, and the social abuse of unemployed people in Britain: transforming claimants into offenders?", *Social Policy and Administration*, vo. 54, No. 2 (February 2020), pp. 278–294.

[18] Katy Jones, Sharon Wright and Lisa Scullion, "The impact of welfare conditionality on experiences of job quality", *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 38, No. 6 (December 2024), pp. 1658–1679.

[19] Unemployment Provision Convention, 1934 (No. 44), Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and Employment Promotion and Protection against Unemployment Convention, 1988 (No. 168).

[20] Direct request to Belgium by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, adopted in 2012 and published at the 102nd session of the International Labour Conference (2013).

[21] Direct request to Brazil by the ILO Committee of Experts, adopted in 2019 and published at the 109th session of the International Labour Conference (2021).

period of unemployment benefits).[22] The Committee therefore leaves no doubt that "suitable" employment is not simply "reasonable" employment that the individual can perform – for which they are physically and mentally fit and sufficiently qualified.[23] Attempts to weaken the standards of what constitutes a "suitable" job – in the name of accelerating the transition from welfare to work – run counter to the core objective of ILO Convention No. 168, which is to promote full, productive and freely chosen employment (arts. 2 and 7). As welfare recipients are pushed into any available job, they may also crowd out low-skilled workers from occupations to which they could otherwise gain access, thereby increasing their risk of long-term unemployment and exclusion.

12. Beyond the negative impacts outlined above, activation programmes may corrode the fabric of society. Individuals subject to welfare conditionality tend to reduce their political and civic participation.[24] Such programmes, moreover, frame poverty as a failure of the individual, rather than as a responsibility of society,[25] and social protection as a favour that the State may grant under whatever conditions it sees fit, rather than as a right that the person may claim against the State. This results in the perception among the public that those who rely on social support, especially in the form of social assistance (as opposed to social insurance to which they have contributed), are potentially profiting from a form of public charity.

13. Distrust towards the State may follow: if the State is too generous, it will be accused of rewarding those who profit from the system – the "undeserving poor" or the "lazy"; but if it is too strict, imposing work search-related conditionalities that are unrealistic and penalizing, this will breed discontent among the beneficiaries of support themselves.

## B. The digitalization of welfare

14. A second area of concern is the reliance on algorithms to detect potential abuses within welfare systems. The former Special Rapporteur warned in 2019 of a "digital welfare dystopia".[26] This is it.[27]

15. In France, it emerged in 2022 that the service responsible for family allowances (Caisse d'allocations familiales) was analysing the personal data of more than 32 million people to identify potential welfare abuses, using algorithms that disproportionately targeted individuals relying on the minimum income scheme (revenu de solidarité active), single-parent households and persons with disabilities: while single-parent households represented only 16 per cent of beneficiaries, they accounted for 36 per cent of administrative investigations, and households that frequently changed their place of

[22] Direct request to Denmark by the ILO Committee of Experts, adopted in 2006 and published at the 96th session of the International Labour Conference (2007).

[23] Direct request to the United Kingdom by the ILO Committee of Experts, adopted in 2020 and published at the 109th session of the International Labour Conference (2021); observation concerning Norway by the ILO Committee of Experts, adopted in 2007 and published at the 97th session (2008); and direct request to Norway by the ILO Committee of Experts, adopted in 1999 and published at the 88th session of the International Labour Conference (2000).

[24] Sara Watson, "Does welfare conditionality reduce democratic participation?", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 48, No. 5 (April 2015), pp. 645–686.

[25] Eva Maria Cox, "Conditionality and control: its implications for groups on welfare and some particular issues for Indigenous people and women", *Social Alternatives*, vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2020), pp. 54–59.

[26] See A/74/493.

[27] Gijsbert Vonk, "Welfare state dystopia as a challenge to the fundamental right of social security", *European Journal of Social Security*, vol. 27, No. 2 (June 2025), pp. 82–97.

residence or dedicated more than 35 per cent of their income to rent were more systematically investigated for potential abuse.[28]

16. In the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Tax and Customs Administration wrongly accused 26,000 parents, many of immigrant origin, of making fraudulent benefit claims between 2005 and 2019, demanding that they repay in full the allowances they had received. The country's Government resigned amid the scandal in January 2021.[29]

17. In the United Kingdom, over 700 subpostmasters were falsely accused between 1999 and 2015 of theft, fraud and false accounting based on data collected by a software system (Horizon) that courts subsequently found to contain "bugs, errors or defects".[30] Also in the United Kingdom, more than 134,000 families were forced to pay back carer's allowances, because they had not been made aware that the allowance (a weekly allowance of £81.90 for people who care for someone for more than 35 hours a week) could not be received if they exceeded the earnings limit of £151 a week (or just over 13 hours of work on the minimum wage). The overpayments (representing a total of £250 million) often amounted to thousands of pounds per household, leaving many households in financial distress after reimbursement was claimed.[31]

18. In Australia, the Robodebt scheme, launched in 2016, compared data obtained from employers with the incomes declared by welfare recipients and identified 866,857 instances of suspected welfare overpayments in the period 2010–2013. In fact, a large number of social security recipients were wrongly pursued for debts that turned out never to have existed, causing enormous harm.[32]

19. These examples come from high-income countries, but digitalization is also making swift progress in low- and middle-income countries, in part due to the rolling out of social registries. Such "dynamic" registries are databases that collect and analyse personal information to determine eligibility for social security, typically relying on algorithms that determine eligibility on the basis of criteria such as employment, ownership of assets such as a car, television or house, or electricity or water consumption. Between 2013 and 2022, largely thanks to World Bank support, the number of countries using social registries increased from 23 to 60.[33] While this digital infrastructure ostensibly helps to target support based on proxy-means testing, it can also result in errors and unjustified exclusion, especially in the absence of easily accessible remedies in cases of misclassification.

## C. The punitive role of social workers

20. In the consultations he led in the preparation of the present report, the Special Rapporteur was also struck by the deepening crisis experienced by social workers. Their role is to provide support and to empower, by connecting people to solutions.

[28] See https://dubasque.org/discrimination-numerique-le-fleau-des-algorithmes-des-caf-confirme-aah-rsa-familles-monoparentales/; and https://www.01net.com/actualites/fraude-aux-allocations-familiales-la-caf-utilise-bien-des-algorithmes-qui-ciblent-les-plus-precaires-selon-la-quadrature-du-net.html.

[29] See the Parliamentary Committee report on the scandal: https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/20201217_eindverslag_parlementaire_ondervragingscommissie_kinderopvangtoeslag.pdf.

[30] Court of Appeal (Criminal Division), *Hamilton and others v. Post Office Limited*, 23 April 2021, EWCA Crim 577, summary, para. 11.

[31] See https://parliamentnews.co.uk/carers-allowance-overpayment-debt-hit-250m-audit-reveals (accessed on 29 June 2025).

[32] Catherine Holmes, *Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme (Report, Volume 1)* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).

[33] World Bank Group, *Charting a Course Towards Universal Social Protection: Resilience, Equity, and Opportunity for All* (Washington, D.C., 2022), p. 57.

Increasingly, however, they are expected to exercise a form of control over the people that turn to them for help, and to ensure that clients do not abuse the system by claiming forms of support to which they are not entitled or by circumventing the conditions attached. This puts their professional integrity at risk. Principle 9.4 of the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles places "not abusing their positions of power" and building "relationships of trust with people that they engage with" at the heart of the practice of social work:[34] that pledge is increasingly difficult to keep.

21. Social workers are also tasked with protecting children from "neglect", which may make it more difficult for them to gain the trust of the parents they seek to support. Poverty in itself should not be treated as a cause of possible "neglect" of the child, thereby justifying the adoption of coercive measures against parents (including, in the most serious cases, the removal of the child from the family). Yet, the Special Rapporteur was alerted to the fact that in practice, "neglect is often a thinly veiled proxy for poverty": families experiencing housing instability, food insecurity and financial hardship are significantly more likely to have their children taken away.[35]

22. In the United States of America, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA)[36] requires that states receiving federal funding for their child welfare systems include "neglect" as a ground for child removals. Neglect, however, is generally defined as (a) lack of medical, dental, surgical, childcare, behavioural and other services; (b) failure to provide for basic needs, including food, nutrition, clothing, education and shelter; (c) failure to supervise a child; and (d) parental circumstances, including mental illness, developmental disorders and domestic violence. There is a strong overlap, therefore, between the risk of "neglect" and poverty.[37] Mandatory reporting laws requiring professionals to report suspected child maltreatment have resulted in a dramatic increase in child abuse reports – from 60,000 when CAPTA was enacted in 1974, to 2 million by 1990, and nearly 4.4 million in 2023,[38] with a disproportionate impact on Black families.[39]

23. In Western Australia, child protection authorities were found to treat conditions related to poverty, including homelessness, as neglect, with disproportionate impacts on low-income households and on Aboriginal families.[40] Aboriginal children are nearly 20 times more likely to be removed from their families than non-Indigenous children.[41] In some cases investigated by Human Rights Watch, the state had failed to provide adequate support to parents needing emergency housing, including domestic violence victims, which ultimately resulted in child protection services removing children from

[34] See https://www.ifsw.org/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles/.

[35] Children's Rights, JMACforFamilies and Angela Olivia Burton, *Welfare and Control: The U.S. Child Welfare System*, submission to the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (February 2025). For the case of France, see *Assemblée nationale (session 2024-2025), Commission d'enquête sur les manquements des politiques publiques de protection de l'enfance, compte rendu de la séance du 13 novembre 2024* (13 November 2024).

[36] United States of America, Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, Public Law No. 93-247 of 31 January 1974.

[37] Human Rights Watch, *"If I Wasn't Poor, I Wouldn't Be Unfit". The Family Separation Crisis in the US Child Welfare System* (November 2022).

[38] United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment 2023* (2025), p. xiii.

[39] Benard P. Dreyer, "Racial/ethnic bias in pediatric care and the criminalization of poverty and race/ethnicity – seek and ye shall find", *JAMA Pediatrics*, vol. 174, No. 8 (August 2020), pp. 751–752.

[40] Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, *Family Matters Report 2024* (2024).

[41] Human Rights Watch, *"All I Know Is I Want Them Home". Disproportionate Removal of Aboriginal Children from Families in Western Australia* (March 2025).

their parents. In other words, the authorities imposed a harsh penalty on families for the State's own failure to provide support.

24. These three dystopian dimensions of welfare – activation, digitalization and control – operate in combination. The digitalization of welfare facilitates the expansion of conditionalities, since it allows not only for the increased monitoring of recipients, but also for automated sanctioning where fraud is suspected, including through the recovery of allowances considered to be incorrectly delivered. Child protection regimes increasingly rely on risk-scoring algorithms to assess the likelihood that a child will be maltreated by their family based on factors such as receiving public assistance, prior child welfare system involvement or living in certain geographical areas.[42] And social workers are being transformed into operators of digitalized systems, evaluated against quantitative key performance indicators that they view as incompatible with building trust-based relationships with the families they help. The associated risks include algorithmic bias, exclusion of vulnerable groups, opacity and lack of legal redress. In addition, the transition towards activation policies and the increased reliance on digital surveillance create a social environment where individuals feel stigmatized and surveilled rather than supported. This fosters an alienated public that feels both blamed for their poverty and stripped of their dignity. Far-right populists reap what has been sown.

# III. The rise of far-right populism

25. These welfare dystopias fuel growing distrust of institutions. By emphasizing that social protection must be "deserved" and by tightening eligibility or imposing stricter conditions, they send a message that access to support is a privilege rather than a right. Such approaches risk fostering social divisions, pitting the "have-nots" against the "have-less" and reinforcing fears of being left behind. Moreover, the weakening of social protection systems due to the shift from welfare to workfare creates economic insecurity, which increases the likelihood of people voting for far-right populist platforms that capitalize on their anxieties.[43]

26. The response to the far right, it seems, should therefore be to alleviate anxiety about the future. European Social Surveys show that, while there is a 25 per cent chance that unemployed people will vote for the far right at the lowest levels of unemployment benefits (compared with 15 per cent of people who are employed), this effect disappears when unemployment benefits are increased. Similarly, higher pension levels, minimum wage legislation and better child allowances have a statistically measurable impact in diminishing the likelihood of voting for the far right.[44]

27. However, even more than individual conditions such as unemployment or having to live on low incomes, it is the fear of status loss that fuels radical right-wing populism.[45] Far-right politicians manufacture resentment. They speak to the emotions: they emphasize love for the homeland, fear of the foreigner and anger against corrupt

[42] Anjana Samant and others, "Family surveillance by algorithm: the rapidly spreading tools few have heard of", American Civil Liberties Union, 29 September 2021.

[43] Denis Ivanov, "Economic insecurity, institutional trust and populist voting across Europe", *Comparative Economic Studies*, vol. 65, No. 3 (September 2023), pp. 461–482.

[44] Tim Vlandas and Daphne Halikiopoulou, "Welfare state policies and far right party support: moderating 'insecurity effects' among different social groups", *West European Politics*, vol. 45, No. 1 (2022), pp. 24–49.

[45] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019).

elites accused of endangering the nation's well-being.[46] They create "anxious citizens" ("besorgte Bürgers", a figure that emerged in German debates), whose fears are in part the result of this manipulation of emotions.[47] In the United States, the sense of status threat felt by the dwindling proportion of traditionally high-status Americans (i.e., whites, Christians and men), as well as by those who perceive the country's global dominance to be threatened, fuelled support for a presidential candidate, Donald Trump, who emphasized reestablishing the status hierarchies of the past.[48] Such feelings are not merely irrational. They are connected to the real social change experienced by voters, and to their sense of insecurity.[49] Failing to respond to such fears risks deepening the sense of alienation among disenfranchised individuals, whose sense that they are being treated with disrespect or condescension will only grow.

## A. The poison of inequalities

28. The growth of inequalities is a major factor explaining the rise of right-wing populism. From 2002 to 2016, support for populist parties in Europe rose from 13 per cent to above 20 per cent, while market income inequality Gini increased from 45 to 49 on average. A study covering 14 European countries over this period showed that a 1 point increase in the Gini index of disposable income inequality was associated with a 1 point increase in support for populist parties, an almost perfect correlation.[50] The failure of political elites to reduce inequalities fosters distrust among those groups within society that are left behind, especially since it threatens social mobility.[51] Inequality also fuels what, in previous reports,[52] the Special Rapporteur has called status anxiety.[53] A study from Finland showed that, even in a State with strong welfare support, voters who expect status decline in the future (typically, the lower middle class, who are struggling not to fall behind) were more likely than those who had already experienced status decline and were living on low incomes to be tempted to vote for the far right.[54]

29. This calls for much bolder policies to reduce inequalities. The pendulum has shifted over the past 40 years from supportive welfare policies to an insistence on rewarding "merit" and incentivizing individuals to acquire skills and adopt forms of behaviour that would allow them to succeed as productive economic agents. The promotion of "merit", however, focused on equal opportunities, even when combined with the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of socioeconomic disadvantage,[55] is not a substitute for redistribution by the tax-and-transfer policies typical of strong

[46] Matthew Levinger, "Love, fear, anger: the emotional arc of populist rhetoric", *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, vol. 6, No. 1 (January 2018), pp. 1–21; Yotam Margalit, "Economic insecurity and the causes of populism, reconsidered", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 33, No. 4 (2019), pp. 152–170.

[47] Carolin Emcke, *Gegen den Hass* (Frankfurt, S. Fischer Verlag, 2016).

[48] Diana C. Mutz, "Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 115, No. 19 (May 2018).

[49] Donatella Bonansinga, "Who thinks, feels. The relationship between emotions, politics and populism", *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, vol. 13, No. 1 (2020), pp. 83–106.

[50] Lukas F. Stoetzer, Johannes Giesecke and Heike Klüver, "How does income inequality affect the support for populist parties?", *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 30, No. 1 (2023), pp. 1–20.

[51] See A/76/177, para. 40.

[52] See A/79/162, para. 14.

[53] Noam Gidron and Peter A. Hall, "The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right", *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 68, No. S1 (November 2017): S57–84.

[54] Zhen Jie Im and others, "With status decline in sight, voters turn radical right: how do experience and expectation of status decline shape electoral behaviour?", *European Political Science Review*, vol. 15, No. 1 (February 2023), pp. 116–135.

[55] See A/77/157.

welfare States (sometimes referred to as equality of results).[56] Without better housing conditions, access to education and nutritious food for children, as well as decent working conditions, including decent wages for the most precarious jobs, at the lower end of the income ladder,[57] there will be no equality of opportunities, and discourses about "meritocracy" will continue to sound unconvincing and even disingenuous.[58]

## B. Orphan territories

30. There is a strong territorial dimension to the rise of far-right populism. Regions that fall behind, due, for instance, to economic decline resulting from globalization,[59] are generally more tempted to vote for far-right parties.[60] Populism grows with economic shocks, which create insecurity.[61] Such shocks may both strengthen one's identification with a particular social group (such as the white working class), giving more salience to ethnic identities, and lead to claims for stronger protection from foreign competition.[62] In France, the rise of the National Front over the period 1995–2012 could thus be linked to exposure to import competition from low-wage countries.[63] The same dynamic occurs where the delivery of public services is reduced. After Italy restricted access to public services in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 residents in 2010, support for far-right parties (Lega (Nord) and Fratelli d'Italia) increased in affected municipalities compared with those that were unaffected by the reform.[64] In declining areas underserved by public services – where postal services are reduced, small train stations are closed down and broadband Internet is absent – a feeling of resentment grows against the political elites,[65] which are perceived as disconnected from the reality of people's lives.[66]

31. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in geographical regions with persistent lower-status cultural markers – such as the use of a non-standard dialect or language – which are more prone to feeling "left behind", alongside higher levels of anti-elite sentiment and out-group resentment. In Germany, the rise in support for Alternative für Deutschland was especially strong in peripheral communities with a

[56] François Dubet, *Les places et les chances. Repenser la justice sociale* (Paris, Seuil, 2010).
[57] See A/78/175.
[58] See A/76/177, paras. 38–39.
[59] David Autor and others, "Importing political polarization? The electoral consequences of rising trade exposure", *American Economic Review*, vol. 110, No. 10 (October 2020), pp. 3139–3183; Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig, "The trade origins of economic nationalism: import competition and voting behavior in Western Europe", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 62, No. 4 (October 2018), pp. 936–953; Dani Rodrik, "Populism and the economics of globalization", *Journal of International Business Policy*, vol. 1, No. 1–2 (June 2018), pp. 12–33.
[60] Dominik Schraff and Jonas Pontusson, "Falling behind whom? Economic geographies of right-wing populism in Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 31, No. 6 (2024), pp. 1591–1619.
[61] Yotam Margalit, "Economic insecurity and the causes of populism, reconsidered," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 33, No. 4 (2019), pp. 152–170.
[62] Gene M. Grossman and Elhanan Helpman, "Identity politics and trade policy", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 25348 (2018); Dani Rodrik, "Why does globalization fuel populism? Economics, culture, and the rise of right-wing populism", *Annual Review of Economics*, vol. 13 (August 2021), pp. 133–170.
[63] Clément Malgouyres, "Trade shocks and far-right voting: evidence from French presidential elections", European University Institute Working Paper RSCAS 2017/21.
[64] Simone Cremaschi and others, "Geographies of discontent: public service deprivation and the rise of the far right in Italy", *American Journal of Political Science* (December 2024).
[65] Pauliina Patana, "Residential constraints and the political geography of the populist radical right: evidence from France", *Perspectives on Politics* vol. 20, No. 3 (September 2022), pp. 842–859.
[66] Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016).

higher prevalence of non-standard (or dialectical) German.[67] Ethnographic studies such as that of the declining industrial enclave of Dagenham in the United Kingdom,[68] of poor neighbourhoods in northern or eastern France[69] or of various communities in the United States, in Ohio, Louisiana or Wisconsin,[70] illustrate how the residents of these neglected areas feel their cultural identity and status are threatened.

32. Residents of these localities often perceive immigrants as a threat, competing for the attention of politicians and for welfare support. They see the allocation of resources as disproportionately benefiting the urban elites, and minorities in particular. "Place resentment", however, is not limited to rural areas; urban residents may resent electoral rules that advantage rural areas and diminish their voice, and suburbanites may feel slighted by spending on urban infrastructure rather than on roads serving suburban commuters.[71] In the Kingdom of the Netherlands for instance, there is a strong correlation between regional livability indicators and support for the far-right Partij voor de vrijheid (PVV), leading commentators to propose regional cohesion policies as key to combating the rise of far-right populism.[72]

## C. Climate change and populist resentment

33. In these orphaned territories, the fear of falling behind is further compounded by climate change. First, climate change-related extreme weather events, such as floods or droughts, can cause significant economic shocks, leading communities to turn to parties that capitalize on anti-elite resentment or offer identity-based narratives in response to crisis.[73] In previous reports, the Special Rapporteur urged Governments to strengthen social protection to shield populations from the impacts of climate change, underscoring its essential role in adaptation.[74] Beyond this human rights imperative, robust social protection may also mitigate the risk of rising resentment in communities most affected by climate risks.

34. Second, the ecological transition itself generates new anxieties. In Europe, although there is broad consensus among mainstream political parties that ambitious climate policies are necessary, the radical right has shifted from largely ignoring climate

[67] Daniel Ziblatt, Hanno Hilbig and Daniel Bischof, "Wealth of tongues: why peripheral regions vote for the radical right in Germany", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 118, No. 3 (August 2024), pp. 1480–1496.

[68] Diane Bolet, "Drinking alone: local socio-cultural degradation and radical right support – the case of British pub closures", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 54, No. 9 (August 2021), pp. 1653–1692.

[69] Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims* (Paris, Fayard, 2009); Benoît Coquard, *Ceux qui restent. Faire sa vie dans les campagnes en déclin* (Paris, La Découverte, 2019).

[70] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York, The New Press, 2016); Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2016); Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*.

[71] B. Kal Munis, "Us over here versus them over there…literally: measuring place resentment in American politics", *Political Behavior*, vol. 44 (2022), pp. 1057–1078; Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, "The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, vol. 11, No. 1 (March 2018), pp. 189–209.

[72] Eveline S. van Leeuwen and Solmaria Halleck Vega, "Voting and the rise of populism: spatial perspectives and applications across Europe," *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2021), pp. 209–219.

[73] Simone Cremaschi and Piero Stanig, "Voting and climate change: how an extreme weather event increased support for a radical-right incumbent in Italy", *The Journal of Politics* (June 2025); Joakim Kulin and Ingemar Johansson Sevä, "Rightwing populist attitudes and public support for climate policies in Western Europe: widening the scope using the European Social Survey", *PLOS Climate*, vol. 3, No. 10 (2024).

[74] See A/HRC/59/51.

change to actively politicizing it. By challenging mitigation policies, far-right populism differentiates itself from the mainstream and appeals to voters sceptical about the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on fossil energy.[75] In the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for instance, an increase in household natural gas taxes in the period 2007–2020, despite being accompanied by redistributive subsidies for renewable energy, was linked to a 5 to 6 percentage point increase in the likelihood of tenants with individualized utility bills voting for radical right parties, which were the only ones opposing the energy transition.[76]

35. In earlier reports, the Special Rapporteur outlined how a "just transition" could protect low-income households from the potential negative impacts of climate mitigation policies, and avoid fuelling resentment against elites.[77] He reiterates that call here.

## D. The erosion of social capital

36. Constituencies are also more prone to be tempted to vote for the radical right where the social links that hold communities together break down. In the United Kingdom, the disappearance of community pubs worsened social isolation, leading to increased support for the anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Residents in districts that experienced one additional community pub closure (relative to the total number of pubs per district) were more likely to support UKIP than any other party by 4.3 percentage points.[78]

37. The weakening of social life may reinforce the impression among the underprivileged that the system does not work for them, and the "inert masses" of people who have lost faith in politics can be easily manipulated by demagogues.[79] Indeed, a sociologist comparing Nazism and fascism with McCarthyism in the United States in the late 1950s concluded that those who are the most vulnerable to the demagogues' tricks are precisely those "who have the fewest opportunities to participate in the formal and informal life of the community".[80] Lack of social connection and political abstention, on the one hand, and the temptation of political extremism, on the other hand, are not two ends of a spectrum: instead, they are two potential reactions to the feeling of social isolation and resentment against the elites and the mainstream political parties that embody them.[81]

38. The relationship between the loss of social capital and the rise of far-right populism raises complex questions, however. One way to rebuild social capital is to recreate links within the community, among people who present certain common characteristics. While there are benefits to the strengthening of such community links in a context in which people feel isolated and where distrust grows, the re-creation of such "bonding" social capital may have the unintended effect of reinforcing identity

[75] Zachary P. Dickson and Sara B. Hobolt, "Going against the grain: climate change as a wedge issue for the radical right", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 58, No. 8 (July 2025), pp. 1733–1759 (illustrating this strategy by a study covering nearly half a million press releases from 76 political parties across nine European democracies).

[76] Erik Voeten, "The energy transition and support for the radical right: evidence from the Netherlands", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 58, No. 2 (February 2025), pp. 394–428. https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241237468

[77] See A/75/181/Rev.1; and A/HRC/56/61.

[78] Bolet, "Drinking alone".

[79] Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2015), pp. 239–240.

[80] William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1959), p. 212.

[81] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), p. 310.

clashes between communities. Indeed, while the rise of the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland in Germany has been particularly striking in regions experiencing strong out-migration, which creates a sense of abandonment among the population, its impacts were felt especially keenly among those engaged in civic networks. Even more than an individual sense of abandonment, it is the shared feeling of "being left behind together" that leads to support for far-right populists.[82]

39. Another approach is to strengthen social links across communities, by creating new solidarity networks between people who traditionally have had less in common: "bridging" social capital.[83] This second approach is more difficult to achieve, but as the Special Rapporteur elaborates further below, it is essential for maintaining the protective role of the welfare State against attempts by far-right populist politicians to polarize society and to portray social protection as benefiting the "out-group" at the expense of the "in-group".

# IV. Far-right populism and social protection

40. It is against this background that the far-right populists claim to represent the "ordinary people" against the "elites". Yet in many cases, they themselves are typically part of the elite, owing their rise in politics to their family wealth or social connections. Once elected, they tend to work to maintain the privileges of the very economic elite they denounce in their speeches.[84]

41. Indeed, this report is being finalized as the United States Congress passes the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025, a piece of legislation that illustrates the "populism of the privileged" to the point of caricature. The bill entails a 30 per cent cut in federal funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, on which 40 million people rely today. This will lead to 7 million people, including more than 2 million children, having their food assistance terminated or cut substantially, as states may not be able to compensate for the funding shortfall.[85] The bill also cuts more than $1 trillion from Medicaid, and will shift $93 billion in federal funding to the states from 2031 to 2034.[86] At least 13.7 million vulnerable people will lose their healthcare coverage as a result,[87] and hospitals and healthcare centres, forced to absorb more of the cost of treating uninsured people, will have to reduce services and employees, or simply close down.[88] Since the bill combines these massive cuts to social safety nets with tax cuts and spending hikes on defence and border security, it will result in a massive transfer of resources from households in the lowest decile of the income distribution to households

[82] Stephan Schütze, "Left behind together and voting for populism: regional out-migration, civic engagement and the electoral success of populist radical right parties", *Social Sciences*, vol. 12, No. 8 (August 2023).

[83] On this distinction, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[84] Benjamin De Cleen and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado, "Populism of the privileged: on the use of underdog identities by comparatively privileged groups", *Political Studies*, vol. 72, No. 3 (August 2024), pp. 1005–1025.

[85] Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "By the numbers: House Republican reconciliation bill takes food assistance away from millions of people", policy brief, 6 June 2025.

[86] Congressional Budget Office, *Estimated Budgetary Effects of an Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to H.R. 1, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Relative to the Budget Enforcement Baseline for Consideration in the Senate* (27 June 2025).

[87] Congressional Budget Office, *Estimated Budgetary Effects of a Bill to Provide for Reconciliation Pursuant to Title II of H. Con. Res. 14, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act* (20 May 2025).

[88] Phil Galewitz and others, "5 ways Trump's tax bill will limit health care access", NPR, 3 July 2025.

in the highest decile,[89] while adding $2.4 trillion to primary deficits over the coming decade.[90]

42. Similarly, Brazil, under its former President, Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), replaced the Bolsa Família programme with Auxílio Brasil, a scheme that, despite its short-term increase in stipends, lacked robust legal and fiscal safeguards and imposed eligibility conditions that excluded many of the country's most vulnerable populations.[91] Cuts to public health, social assistance and food security programmes deepened existing inequalities, leaving over half of Brazilian households experiencing food insecurity by 2021.[92]

43. Even when they do not dismantle the welfare State, far-right populist parties tend to undermine its logic. They encourage a shift from protection to discipline, reinforcing a cultural and institutional belief in producerism – the idea that only those who contribute economically deserve protection. This logic underpins the exclusion of migrants, the unemployed and even low-wage workers.[93] A line is drawn between the "in-group", which they seek to protect, and the "out-group", which (they assert) does not deserve protection.[94] They seek to control how welfare is delivered, often through clientelist practices. Viewing the bureaucracy associated with the welfare State as a potential limitation to their power,[95] they tend to circumvent or weaken it, sometimes in order to provide more direct forms of support that buy political loyalty.

44. Welfare chauvinism consists in reserving social protection for the members of the national in-group, while excluding others: migrants, and sometimes ethnic minorities who are not citizens although they may have been residing in the State for many years. In Europe, the sudden increase in refugees fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic in 2015 resulted in a significant rise in such forms of exclusion, under the influence of far-right parties.[96] While the rise of such attitudes was documented in particular for Central and Eastern European countries,[97] the view that immigrants need to obtain citizenship before being given equal rights to social benefits, while incompatible with the requirements of international human rights law,[98] has gained traction in recent years even in traditionally open countries such as Scandinavian countries.[99]

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[89] Congressional Budget Office (see footnote 87 above).

[90] Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, "Breaking down the One Big Beautiful Bill", 4 June 2025.

[91] Camila Mikie Nakaharada and others, *Workers' Rights and Social Protection in Brazil: Legal and Policy Gaps* (São Paulo and Amsterdam, Conectas Human Rights and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Watch, 2022), pp. 20–21.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Jellen Olivares-Jirsell, "Recalibration, not austerity: welfare States and the struggle for liberalism", *Populism & Politics*, European Center for Populism Studies (December 2024), pp.1–21.

[94] István Benczes, "Taking back control over the economy: from economic populism to the economic consequences of populism", *European Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, No. 1 (2022), pp. 109–123.

[95] Attila Bartha, Zsolt Boda and Dorottya Szikra, "When populist leaders govern: conceptualising populism in policy making", *Politics and Governance*, vol. 8, No. 3 (2020), pp. 71–81.

[96] Rosan Haenraets and Femke Roosma, "Welfare chauvinism in times of crises: the impact of the radical right political discourse", *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 34, No. 2 (May 2024), pp. 159–174.

[97] Lee Savage, "Preferences for redistribution, welfare chauvinism, and radical right party support in Central and Eastern Europe", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2023), pp. 584–607.

[98] See the statement by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the duties of States towards refugees and migrants under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/2017/1).

[99] David Andreas Bell, Marko Valenta and Zan Strabac, "Nordic welfare chauvinism: a comparative study of welfare chauvinism in Sweden, Norway and Finland", *International Social Work*, vol. 66, No. 6 (November 2023), pp. 1786–1802.

45. Welfare chauvinistic attitudes are encouraged by far-right populists, who can conveniently present themselves as defending the social protection to which the native population is entitled, against the competing claims from other groups. This discourse is particularly seductive for members of the native population who face economic insecurity and who fear falling behind, leading them to see the out-group as competing for scarce public resources where public deficits run high. These outcasts are especially migrants, but they also include people considered as "undeserving" of support because of their unwillingness to work and their long-term dependency on public assistance. Support for the Rassemblement National in France, for instance, has been likened to "moral boundary-making",[100] as voters seek to dissociate themselves from those who, in their view, abuse the social protection system (dismissed as freeloaders ("assistés")) and attempt to "jump the queue" without deserving support. Voters for the far right seek thereby to rebuild a positive identity on the basis of "work" and "merit". This attitude is further reinforced by the perception that mainstream political parties no longer represent the interests of "ordinary people".[101] Indeed, left-leaning parties themselves mainly attract white-collar professionals, [102] and the political elites are disproportionately made up of wealthy and highly educated individuals.[103]

46. This attitude is also encouraged by the idea that the welfare State is "inefficient" and "wasteful", that "social rights are not rights but perks given to a parasitic group" and that restrictions on welfare are therefore justified by the need to better manage public resources.[104] This, for instance, explains the electoral success of Javier Milei in Argentina. At the time of his election, 86 per cent of Argentines believed the economy was doing poorly, around a quarter of the population was affected by food insecurity and faith in democratic politics was dwindling (only 68 per cent of citizens expressed support for democracy by 2023, compared with 90 per cent in 2008).[105] Mr. Milei has since made deep cuts to public spending and social protection programmes, including vetoing pension increases and scaling back free medications for retirees. Minimum pensions are 5.3 per cent below the purchasing power they had in November 2023, and the amount barely covers 30 per cent of the basic food basket for senior citizens. In the name of austerity, the Government of Argentina has also reduced medication coverage: 800,000 senior citizens no longer have their medications covered by public health insurance. And public investment has halted: Argentina stopped building schools, kindergartens, health centres, hospitals and housing. People in poverty are thus paying the highest price for the restoration of fiscal balance.[106]

47. Similarly, the 2014 electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India has been attributed to the impatience of a population that has witnessed widening inequalities and the persistence of unemployment and high levels of informal and precarious work, despite strong economic growth. BJP attributed the mixed economic

[100] Raphaël Challier, "S'engager au Front national pour ne plus être des "cassos"? Le rôle du mépris de classe dans une campagne municipale", *Sociétés contemporaines*, vol. 119, No. 3 (2020), pp. 61–87.

[101] Armin Schäfer, "Return with a vengeance: working class anger and the rise of populism", Social Science Research Council, 8 August 2017.

[102] Frederick Solt, "Economic inequality and democratic political engagement", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 52, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 48–60.

[103] Jane Gingrich and Silja Häusermann, "The decline of the working-class vote, the reconfiguration of the welfare support coalition and consequences for the welfare state", *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 25, No. 1 (February 2015), pp. 50–75.

[104] Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, "To confront rising neofascism, the Latin American left must rediscover itself", Dossier No. 79 (August 2024), p. 29.

[105] Virginia Oliveros and Emilia Simison, "Why did Argentina just elect a radical right-wing political outsider?", Journal of Democracy, November 2023; Gabriel Vommaro, *La ultraderecha en Argentina: entre el oportunismo y la innovación de Milei* (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2023).

[106] Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, *La Cocina de Los Cuidados, Informe No. 5*, June 2025.

record of the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance that governed India between 2004 and 2014 to inefficient policies and incompetent elites, and Narendra Modi was elected to power on the promise of less entitlements but more jobs.[107] In other words, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and the easy scapegoating of minorities such as Muslims, tribal peoples and Dalits can be attributed to the failure of past Governments to ensure that economic growth benefits all groups of the population by investing in infrastructure and public services.[108]

# V. Social protection as a dam against far-right populism

48. Because the rise of the far right is strongest in regions where people feel left behind and fear the ecological transition, the provision of universal public services and social protection is crucial in order to stem this evolution. Yet, particularly in societies that are ethnically divided and in which poverty is closely correlated with ethnicity or migrant status, a welfare system that is perceived as too generous can fuel resentment among native voters, who feel that they are in competition with immigrants for access to benefits.[109] There is indeed a statistically significant correlation between inequalities and the ethno-nationalist vote: the more people fear they may fall behind as inequalities persist, the more they seek solace in belonging to their group.[110]

49. Mainstream political parties therefore face a dilemma: redistributive policies, if they are perceived as benefiting the "out-group" more than the native population, could be resisted, and fuel resentment and thus support for the far right. The European Union law imposed on Austrian municipalities to make social housing accessible to previously excluded immigrants, for instance, was shown to have led to an increase in support for the far right.[111] And in Germany, 87 per cent of voters for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland would oppose increasing social benefits because of the fear that such increases would mostly go to "illegitimate" beneficiaries, including migrants.[112] The concern that social protection is unaffordable, and that immigrants, or the "undeserving poor", benefit disproportionately,[113] is especially strong among middle-class voters who are members of the majority group but fear that they will fall behind.[114]

50. In highly divided societies, the risk of a backlash against social protection therefore calls for a response that combines three strategies. First, perhaps paradoxically, universal social protection schemes or the provision of basic public services accessible to all – rather than schemes narrowly targeted at those identified as in need – may be more sustainable, as they will enjoy wider support across the community. Indeed, even low-income households may benefit more from more

[107] Louise Tillin, "The political economy of populism in India", King's College London, 7 May 2024.
[108] Kalim Siddiqui, "Hindutva, neoliberalism and the reinventing of India", *Journal of Economic and Social Thought*, vol. 4, No. 2 (July 2017), pp. 142–186.
[109] Martin Lukk, "Politics of boundary consolidation: income inequality, ethnonationalism, and radical-right voting", *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, vol. 10 (January-December 2024).
[110] Ibid.
[111] Charlotte Cavaillé and Jeremy Ferwerda, "How distributional conflict over in-kind benefits generates support for far-right parties", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 85, No. 1 (January 2023), pp. 19–33.
[112] Ursula Münch and others, "Wohlstand in Gefahr? Ursachen und Folgen von Populismus", *ifo Schnelldienst*, vol. 77, No. 3 (2024).
[113] Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik and Monika Köppl-Turyna, "Cushion or catalyst? How welfare state generosity moderates the impact of economic vulnerability on populist radical right support", Agenda Austria Working Paper, No. 16 (2018).
[114] Koen Damhuis and Ekaterina R. Rashkova, "The politics of resentment: what is it and how is it mobilized by populist radical right-wing parties in different contexts?", *Frontiers in Political Science*, vol. 6 (2024).

universal forms of social protection, because these schemes enjoy broader support within the population,[115] except perhaps where the gaps between groups are such that some (immigrants, the "lazy" who do not work, etc.) are perceived as benefiting more than others.[116] To maximize the poverty-reducing impacts of social protection while maintaining its affordability, a form of "targeted universalism" might be preferred, combining universal coverage with increased support for low-income households and improved targeting of impoverished geographical areas.

51. Second, the political sustainability of generous social protection schemes will be further enhanced in the long term by increasing "bridging" social capital, tying different communities together. This is especially important in countries where there is a strong correlation between economic marginalization (and reliance on social protection) and ethnicity; those countries where, in other words, poverty and social exclusion are concentrated within certain ethnic communities. Indeed, under such circumstances, support for redistributive policies based on taxes and social transfers will be weaker, since the average voter may have the impression that such redistribution will mainly benefit not people like them, but the outgroup, such as the Roma and the Dalit communities, certain ethnic or religious minorities, or migrants. Indeed, this is one major reason why the welfare State has enjoyed less support in the United States than in European countries. Because the United States is a highly racialized society – with a strong correlation between race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status – the white voter may feel that welfare benefits not "us" but "them", and thus their support for higher taxes and higher levels of redistribution may be weaker.[117] Conversely, the more communities are reconciled and the less society is polarized across ethnic, caste, religious or class lines, the fewer tensions there will be between generous provision of social protection and the risks of a populist backlash.

52. Third, State institutions must create trust: they must improve transparency and accountability in order to reassure voters that public resources are well managed and that social protection works.[118] Welfare chauvinism emerges only due to the instrumentalization of anti-immigrant sentiment by the far right,[119] and it is the price that mainstream parties pay for failing to adequately explain the benefits of social investment for all.

# VI. Conclusion

53. **Redistribution through social protection is not just an economic issue; it is also a political challenge that deserves to be considered in its own right. Mainstream parties have created fertile ground for the rise of far-right populism by reengineering the welfare State; by entertaining the idea that social protection should go to the "deserving poor" and to the "native" population first, whereas it**

[115] Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme, "The paradox of redistribution and strategies of equality: Welfare State institutions, inequality, and poverty in the Western countries", *American Sociological Review* vol. 63, No. 5 (October 1998), pp. 661–687.

[116] Dimitri Gugushvili and Tijs Laenen, "Two decades after Korpi and Palme's 'paradox of redistribution': what have we learned so far and where do we take it from here?", *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, vol. 37, No. 2 (July 2021), pp. 112–127.

[117] Alberto Alesina and Edward L. Glaeser, *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe: A World of Difference* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004); Reuel Schiller, *Forging Rivals: Race, Class, Law, and the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[118] Ivanov, "Economic insecurity, institutional trust and populist voting across Europe" (see footnote 45).

[119] Romana Careja and Eloisa Harris, "Thirty years of welfare chauvinism research: findings and challenges", *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 32, No. 2 (May 2022), pp. 212–224.

**is in fact a human right, grounded in international law, that should be guaranteed to all under the State's jurisdiction; and by presenting social protection as a burden on public budgets, whereas it is in reality an investment in the future, with potentially high returns.**

54. **It is time to change course. Leaders who wish to avoid the backsliding of democracy should do more to alleviate fears and to provide economic security. And they should avoid language that presents social protection as charity reserved for those who deserve it. The response to the threat of the far right must be to take social protection seriously as a human right of the individual and as a public good that generates strong positive externalities benefiting all members of society.**