Keeping the ‘open society’ open

In recent years, populism and solidarity have been the focus of public debate. Both issues are very much interlinked: if one wants to avoid radical populists gaining the upper hand, solidarity with those who feel attracted by the simplistic rhetoric of populism, who feel they will be left behind in an age of massive transformation, is necessary. It is the best way to defend a way of life characterized by open, inclusive, liberal and internationalist societies.

The increasing polarization of our societies is playing into the hands of right-wing populists. It is the basis upon which they can develop an ‘us versus them’ logic undermining cohesion within and between our societies. This increasing polarization is fuelled by four key insecurities.

First, socio-economic insecurities as citizens (including the middle classes) fear that they will be negatively affected by the new economic realities. These insecurities are fuelled by an increasingly uneven distribution of wealth, job insecurity, social exclusion and the widespread perception that parts of society suffer the negative economic consequences of more integrated regional and global markets.

Second, societal and cultural insecurities as people feel their personal and ethnical/cultural identity. They are alarmed by what they see as the erosion of accustomed social norms, such as traditional family or religious values, or by the supposedly ‘overwhelming’ volume of migrants/foreigners entering their country, even if the actual numbers do not justify these fears.

Third, generational insecurities deriving from increasing divisions between generations, fuelled by the fact that younger people are suffering disproportionately high levels of enduring unemployment and a lack of prospects.

Finally, foundations and think-tanks should support efforts aiming to offer a positive counter-narrative in particularly contested areas underpinned by proposals that are implementable, forward-looking and address citizens’ real fears. There is a need to elucidate the virtues and benefits of open and liberal societies and explain why they will ultimately be more capable of addressing the major challenges of globalization. In more concrete terms and given the significance of the issue in many national debates, there is a need to further explore the links between migration and the rise of populism. To do so, one should explain and communicate the manifold benefits of migration, while at the same time making clear that migration flows need to be managed and openly addressing some of the pressures migration can generate, for example, on labour markets, housing or local public services.