

The Rise of The Far Right in Europe

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Causes of the Rise of the Far Right

While there are multiple economic, social, cultural and political causes for the current rise in the radical right in various European countries, it is difficult to say which is the most important. Certainly, the economic crisis triggered in 2008 and the ensuing single-minded pursuit by EU and national authorities of neoliberal deficit-control and austerity measures are one key factor. Such economic policies increase the gap between the privileged elite and the brunt of the population and thus offer the far right opportunities to harness the dissatisfaction of those who have been left behind. The situation is compounded by social changes that have shrunk the former industrial working class, which had traditionally supported classic left-wing parties. Cultural changes and, in particular, the crisis of the great ideologies (especially on the left, with its transformational aspirations) have led to the spread of individualist, divisive and cynical views of reality throughout society.

However, perhaps the best explanation can be found in the crisis of democracy, which today, more than ever before, seems incapable of fulfilling its theoretical promise. Conventional democratic politics has adapted itself to (one might even say, given in to) the interests of high finance; thus, the alternation between centre-right and centre-left governments offers no real alternatives in terms of economic models, but rather subtle variations on a single immutable pattern that seems to strip representative institutions of meaning and reduce pluralist elections to mere empty rituals. As a result, the far right benefits from

popular disgust with a corrupt, privileged and oligopolistic political class, even as actual democracy seems powerless in the face of the untouchable large economic and financial corporations. In this regard, establishment parties are regularly accused of not representing the true *people*; in opposition to this, and to representative institutions as a whole, the far right calls for *direct* political participation and for placing trust in more or less “charismatic” *leaders* able to connect with the people without intermediaries. The old “political class” is written off en masse (regardless of whether the conventional left or conventional right is in power) for its partisan cronyism and inability to solve social problems.

Core Ideas of the Radical Right

The far right embodies the worst of the European ideological tradition: exclusive nationalist essentialism, counter-Enlightenment dogmatism and political authoritarianism. Its message today is based on three core ideas: chauvinistic and ethnic exaltation of the nation; anti-immigrant xenophobia; and “anti-politician,” anti-establishment populism. In this regard, the far right offers its followers an exclusive *identity*, singles out the *culprits* (the establishment) and advocates simple and expeditious solutions (throw out the foreigners, overthrow the “political class”).

The main ideological obsession of the far right is the *sacrosanct* nation; hence, the myth of the ethnic purity of “our people.” This central tenet of the far right’s discourse and actions shows itself in two ways: outright rejection of non-EU immigration and, increasingly, rejection of the EU itself. Xenophobia, of course, is one of the factors offering the greatest electoral dividends to the far right, which is notorious

for its demagoguery regarding the alleged “dangers” of immigration and, in particular, of Muslim immigrants, who are depicted as being incapable of integration and as intractable opponents of “Christian and Western civilisation.” In this context, immigrants are blamed for “freeloading” off the welfare state, rising crime rates (including terrorism), and even for reintroducing diseases that had been eradicated in Europe.

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At the same time, the far right no longer encourages mere Euro-scepticism, but rather full-blown Euro-phobia, arguing that globalisation and Europeanisation are two sides of the same coin, that is, manoeuvres by the powerful elites to denationalise European peoples. From this point of view, the EU is portrayed as a sort of modern-day Soviet Union, artificial and an oppressor of homelands. While the entire far right coincides in its outright rejection of any possible future political federalisation of the EU, some of its members might support certain types of intergovernmental cooperation. In this regard, some far-right

parties advocate leaving the EU (UKIP), others dissolving it (FN), and still others “shrinking it down” to a mere economic coordinator of sovereign states (PRM, NSA). This rejection of the EU in its current form does not, however, preclude having a significant presence in the European Parliament, in which the various parties hope to form a strong bloc following the May 2014 elections (the fleeting attempt to form such a bloc in 2007-2008 failed due to internal differences and it was ultimately dissolved).

In short, for the far right, democracy as we know it is an empty shell and current economic policy is an anti-popular plan to advance the globalising agenda. Its solutions are thus quite simple: for the economy, protectionism and welfare chauvinism; in politics, a hard line and direct participation; at the social level, an anti-immigrant discourse based on fear and hatred; and at the cultural level, an emphasis on traditional family and religious values.

Types of Far-right Parties

The European radical right can be divided into two main, albeit increasingly indistinguishable, categories: the old parties of neo-fascist origin and the newer populist ones. In any case, all are based on strong leadership, hierarchical organisations and a radicalised activist rank-and-file. The first category includes an especially extremist sub-group (ChA, JMM) and a group of parties that have engaged in a bit of cosmetic marketing (FN, VB, FPÖ); the

TABLE 6	Party Acronyms
ChA	<i>Chrysí Avgí</i> / Golden Dawn
DF	<i>Dansk Folkeparti</i> / Danish People's Party
FN	<i>Front National</i> / National Front
FPÖ	<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i> / Austrian Freedom Party
FrP	<i>Fremskrittspartiet</i> / Progress Party
JMM	<i>Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom</i> / Movement for a Better Hungary
LN	<i>Lega Nord</i> / Northern League
NDP	<i>Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> / German National Democrat Party
NSA	<i>Natsionalen Sayuz Ataka</i> / National Attack Union
PRM	<i>Partidul România Mare</i> / Greater Romania Party
PS	<i>Perussuomalaiset</i> / Finns Party
PVV	<i>Partij Voor de Vrijheid</i> / Party for Freedom
SD	<i>Sverigedemokraterna</i> / Sweden Democrats
SVP	<i>Schweizerische Volkspartei</i> / Swiss People's Party
VB	<i>Vlaams Belang</i> / Flemish Interest
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party

second category includes a notoriously demagogic sub-group (UKIP, LN, PVV, NSA, PRM) and another group of parties that are somewhat more outwardly reserved (FrP, DF, SD, PS, SVP).

Marine Le Pen's National Front (FN) has emerged as a sort of benchmark party for the rest and expects to receive a considerable share of the vote due to the disappointment of many French voters with the current governing national political majority. Its strategy of proposing anti-EU, anti-immigration and anti-"political class" solutions is thus working. The FN recently signed an agreement with Geert Wilders (PVV), an Islamophobe who earns his greatest electoral dividends in Holland by fanning the flames of xenophobia.

Two of the parties in this category are particularly dangerous. The first is the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, due to its paramilitary structure and violence against immigrants and anti-fascists. Golden Dawn is a radically ethnocentric and xenophobic party, and the Greek government has been slow to act against it. The second is Jobbik, which is a reflection of Hungary's reactionary regression under the "moderate" Viktor Orban. The Hungarian far right is linked to the legacy of the sinister "Arrow Cross" party (the Hungarian Nazis from the final stages of WWII) and espouses an anti-Roma, anti-gay and anti-EU agenda.

Among the populists, the most important ones are UKIP, a nearly single-issue party that aims to get the United Kingdom out of the EU and bring incoming immigration to an immediate halt, and the Northern League. The latter has fallen on hard times of late and has clearly chosen to embrace a xenophobic and racist discourse. The intolerable and repeated insults, as well as the harassment of the former Italian Minister of Integration, Cécile Kyenge, bear testament to the party's reactionary strategy.

Effects of the Far Right on the System

It is unsettling to note the gradual relative "normalisation" of the far right, as the establishment parties (from the "moderate" right to certain sectors of the social democrats) accept aspects of its discourse and have even begun to implement some of its proposed solutions (the expulsion and incarceration in near jail-like conditions of undocumented immi-

grants). In this regard, the far right has managed to tilt both "moderate" conservatives and a segment of the social democrats (the French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, is paradigmatic) towards the right. It is antithetical for European governments made up of parties from the "centre" to be toughening their asylum laws, restricting incoming immigration as much as possible, re-establishing internal border checks (in violation of the spirit of the Schengen agreement), insisting on failed and unfair socio-economic solutions, and reducing democracy to a mere façade, an empty periodic electoral ritual that does not actually make it possible to test out alternatives to the current hegemonic economic and financial policies.

TABLE 7

Results in the Last National Elections
and in the 2009 European Elections
(in alphabetical order)

Party	Percentage	MPs
ChA	7.0	21 out of 300 (2012)
DF	12.0	25 out of 179 (2011) 1 euro-MP
FN	4.3	2 out of 577 (2012) 3 euro-MPs
FPÖ	20.5	40 out of 183 (2013) 2 euro-MPs
FrP	16.3	29 out of 169 (2013)
JMM	16.7	47 out of 386 (2010) 3 euro-MPs
LN	4.8	18 out of 630 (2013) 9 euro-MPs
NSA	9.4	21 out of 240 (2009) 2 euro-MPs
PRM	1.5	- (2012) 3 euro-MPs
PS	9.4	39 out of 200 (2012) 1 euro-MP
PVV	10.1	15 out of 150 (2012) 4 euro-MPs
SD	5.7	20 out of 349 (2010)
SVP	26.6	54 out of 200 (2011)
VB	7.7	12 out of 150 (2010) 2 euro-MPs
UKIP	3.1	- (2010) 9 euro-MPs

In short, it is incongruous to share part of the discourse and solutions prescribed by the far right, as it legitimates policies and values that fly in the face of the best of the European Enlightenment tradition and, moreover, serves only to benefit the far right itself at the polls. It leads to confusion and even withdrawal from the electoral process entirely (in favour of abstention) among the voters of truly moderate parties, who are fed up with the overall back-

wards slide, which is hardly good news for European democracy.

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In light of this situation, the moderate right, centre-left and left must redouble their cooperation to rethink current restrictive migratory policies, which are ineffective and unfair, from top to bottom. Likewise, they must revive their defence of the welfare state, for its egalitarian redistributive value. And last, but not least, they must strengthen all the facets and potential of pluralist democracy to make it more transparent, more oriented towards the safeguard of basic rights, and more participatory. Such a programme would doubtless be difficult to achieve; however, it could significantly contribute to stopping the seemingly overwhelming tide of reactionary populisms now sweeping across Europe, which are benefited not only by the especially adverse objective conditions caused by the

crisis, but also the inability of the conventional “political class” to renew itself completely and connect with the large majority of citizens.

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