The Populist Radical Right in Europe

Yotam Rosner*

In recent years, the populist radical right parties have grown in strength in many European countries, including France, Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Finland, Poland, and Hungary. The meteoric rise of the radical right parties reflects broad public criticism of global trends such as immigration, multiculturalism, and the concentration of political power in the hands of the European Union and its institutions. Accordingly, a not insignificant part of the radical right's agenda is directed toward the delegitimization of the EU and the tarnishing of its image in the eyes of Europe's citizens, with the intention of encouraging the exit of additional countries from the EU. It is no coincidence that senior EU officials feel that the rise of the populist radical right has far reaching consequences for the future of the EU and its ability to weather future crises. A large part of the success of the radical right parties stems from their close relations with the Kremlin, which works through them to undermine the EU from within. Due to their anti-Muslim agenda and their view of Israel as the spearhead of the West's fight against Islam, the rise of the radical right parties will likely have implications for the future relations between Europe and Israel.

In early 2016, forthcoming events such as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, the vote in Britain to leave the EU (Brexit),

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and the increased parliamentary power of the radical right movements in many European countries would have seemed more like a far-fetched Hollywood movie than a realistic political scenario. However, in hindsight, these developments in fact appear to be a natural continuation of processes that characterized the previous decade, including: the global economic crisis in 2008 and the ensuing recession; the loss of confidence in political institutions; the growing alienation toward the establishment media; and the rise of alternative media and the social media. Against the background of these trends, the populist radical right movements began to accumulate legitimacy and support. The strengthening of the radical right in Europe in recent years led Jean Claude Junker, President of the European Commission's General Assembly, in a speech following a series of electoral successes by the radical right parties in Europe and first and foremost among them the referendum in Britain to leave the EU, to warn of "galloping populism" that threatens the unity of the EU.[1]

Parallel to the victory in Britain, the radical right has accumulated major political successes throughout Europe. In Germany, the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party won 12.6 percent of the seats in the Bundestag elections in September 2017.[2] In the presidential elections in France in May 2017, National Front (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen came in second in the first round of the presidential elections with 21.4 percent of the vote, and won 34 percent of the vote in the second round.[3] In Holland, the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, finished in second place in the general elections in March 2016, and in Austria, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPO) won 26 percent and was expected to join the coalition as one of the main partners.[4] Similar trends can be seen in Denmark, Finland, Poland, and Hungary.

This essay looks at what characterizes the radical right parties, the factors that led to their rise in popularity, and the manner in which they use their political power to weaken the EU. In addition, it will look at their close ties with Russia and their effect on the relations between Europe and Israel.

The Nature of the Populist Radical Right in Europe

Various definitions of the "populist radical right" are often used to describe parties such as the National Front in France, the Austrian Party of Freedom, the Law and Order party (PiS) in Poland, and the Alternative for Germany party. In general, these are parties that encourage their voters to fear certain

Far right nationalists in Krakow light torches during a ceremony commemorating the 73rd anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, August 1, 2017. Photo: Omar Marques / Pacific Press / LightRocket via Getty Images

social phenomena, most of which are the outcome of globalization, namely loss of jobs due to open markets; the lack of personal security and the threat to local identity due to the presence of non-European immigrants; the constraints on freedom of expression due to the need to be politically correct; and reduced national sovereignty as a result of the concentration of political power in supranational institutions.[5]

The populist radical right parties in Europe range from populist right parties, such as the Party of Freedom (PW) in Holland, which presents itself as the protector of European liberalism against Islamic oppression, to neo-fascist parties whose most prominent representative is the Golden Dawn party in Greece, which has clear neo-Nazi tendencies. There are important differences between these parties: the rightist parties in Eastern Europe are based on territorial revisionism and ethnic threats originating from minorities, while in Western Europe the main issues are immigration and multiculturalism.[6] Nonetheless, there is a consensus in the academic world that the parties belong to one "family."[7] The dominant characteristic of these movements is the ethno-national exclusivity of citizenship, reflected in the slogan "our people first." The main position of these parties is that nations need to be

populated exclusively by members of the local community, and that non-local elements (people and ideas) threaten the stability of the country.[8] The growth of the radical right is attributed to three main factors: immigration, economic recession, and rejection of multiculturalism.

Immigration: Immigration from the Middle East and Africa to the European countries, which peaked in the summer of 2015, is one of the main themes in the populist radical right agenda. The fear among large parts of the public for their economic and personal security and for the cultural-national character of their country has been exploited by the radical right parties, which have waged a major campaign against the absorption of immigrants, particularly immigrants from Muslim countries. Members of the radical right present themselves as "protectors of liberal values" against the Muslim anti-liberal community, which will in the future force anti-pluralistic values on the "authentic" residents who are disappearing from Europe.[9]

Economic recession: Globalization, which is characterized by the opening of markets to international trade, has changed the face of the world, and while it has brought prosperity to many, it has widened social gaps for others. The rise of the radical right in Europe and the US constitutes a "vote of no confidence" in the global system and a protest by the "losers of globalization." These are people who did not find their place in the era of automation and outsourcing that led to the loss of jobs, primarily blue collar jobs and particularly among the rural unskilled population that was employed primarily in those jobs. The employment rate among the younger population reached a low point in 2016. For example, the general rate of unemployment is 10 percent, and among the young it is 26.4 percent. In Italy, the rate of unemployment among the young is 37.7 percent; in Belgium, it is 20.1 percent; and in Greece it is 47 percent.[10] The main narrative of the populist parties in their attempt to appeal to voters that have not achieved economic security involves criticizing the establishment or the elites, while presenting the populist parties as the authentic voice of the people, as opposed to the elites who are concerned only about themselves.

Multiculturalism: For more than a generation, the economic elites created a social-cultural consensus on a wide range of issues, from free trade and the advantages of immigration to equality in marriage. The unity on these issues pushed those opposed to these values to the political sidelines and created general resentment against the establishment or the "elites." As in the case of economic recession, the rise of the radical right in Europe constitutes a

"vote of no confidence" in a system characterized by multiculturalism and progressive thinking, represented by what the rightist parties have called the "elites."[11] The populist radical right parties are opposed to the inclusion of minorities (both ethnic and religious), the LGBT community, and other groups in the public discourse. Essentially, they relate to only one group as legitimate, namely the "people," and present themselves as the people's exclusive representative. The distinction between the "elites" and the "people" is based less on a person's wealth and more on the values they espouse. According to the radical right parties, even if they are not supported by all citizens, they represent the "grassroots" core that has been neglected by the multicultural establishment.[12]

The Rightist Parties and the Stability of the EU

Although the populist right parties focus on domestic issues, the threat of the rise of the radical right parties to the EU and its institutions is significant. The radical right parties have risen in popularity to a large extent by successfully attracting the votes of losers of globalization who oppose European integration. This goal is common to the populist radical right parties, as well as the radical left parties who have set themselves the goal of destroying the neo-liberal agenda of the EU.[13] Immigration, unemployment, and economic recession have created a feeling among the public that the EU is the principal party responsible for the situation. The main claim of opponents to the EU – the "Eurosceptics" – is that the common man in Europe does not benefit in any way from the EU and its institutions. Thus, the "EU multicultural eurocrats" are perceived as a bureaucratic elite who impose petty regulations removed from the day-to-day needs of Europe's citizens.[14]

The most prominent representative of the Eurosceptics is the UK Independence Party (UKIP) whose leader, Nigel Farage, blames the EU for a wide variety of problems, including uncontrolled immigration and the rise of radical Islam in Britain. The party was part of the forces that worked to pass the referendum on leaving the EU. The growing popularity of Farage, Le Pen, and the like is attributed to sectors that want Europe to be a mosaic of countries rather than an integrated bloc based on a common market, open borders, and a common currency. They seek a Europe that resembles what existed before the countries of Europe initiated the "Great Experiment," and they ignore the fact that the goal of the "Great Experiment" was to prevent Europe from returning to an endless cycle of wars. "What we've tried to

do in Europe is go against all the trends globally," says Farage. "Globally, the world is breaking down into smaller units. The desire to reverse that trend shows Europe's complete lack of understanding of how human beings operate."[15] The British vote became a major component in the election campaigns of the extreme right in France and Holland, which has created the fear among EU leaders of a "domino effect" whereby additional countries will exit from the EU. As a result, the EU has adopted a hardline stance in the negotiations with Britain over the exit agreement, with the goal of deterring additional countries from taking the same route.[16]

Although the radical right parties are abhorred by many, it is possible that their venomous discourse against the EU will push the centrist parties to adopt a stance that is less supportive of European integration in general and the EU in particular. For example, incoming Austrian President Sebastian Kurz was elected in October 2017 on a solidly Eurosceptic ticket.[17] The continuing rise of the radical right parties may push other leaders to follow his lead, and European integration will become a political issue rather than a consensus.

Cooperation between the Populist Radical Right in Europe and the Kremlin

The global media has regularly reported Russia's intervention in support of the right wing populist parties all over Europe. The involvement has been consistent and widespread, and has consisted of campaign financing,[18] the spread of fake news with the goal of creating an atmosphere of panic during elections,[19] and most of all, activity on the social media platforms during election campaigns, including the widespread dissemination of divisive news stories, the distortion of material, and the encouragement of racist discourse and incitement, in order to assist the Eurosceptic parties.[20]

The links between the sides is based on common ideological positions on a significant number of issues: populist rightist parties in Europe focus on limiting immigration, halting global political and economic integration (by denying the need for the EU and in some cases also NATO), taking radical measures in the war on Islamic radicalism, and in most cases opposing cultural liberalism and secularization in their own country. On all these fronts, the parties view Putin as an ally. Since he began another term as President of Russia in 2012, Putin has presented himself as the protector of conservative social values, particularly in his opposition to rights for homosexuals and as

an alternative to the Western countries that according to him "are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual."[21] Likewise in the area of defense policy, Putin has positioned himself as a staunch fighter against radical Islam, both in Chechnya and more recently in Syria. He can claim that he has carried on the fight against Islamic radicals with more energy than any Western nation.

For the regime in Russia, the rise of the Eurosceptic parties, both on the left and on the right, coincides with its national interest. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the EU has maintained economic sanctions on Russia, which are directed against both Russia's financial market and its energy and defense industries. The sanctions are renewed every six months by the EU countries,[22] and the EU has succeeded in hindering Russian economic endeavors in other ways as well. For example, European regulation in the energy sector restricts Russian energy companies in the European market. For this reason, Russian is interested in weakening the EU or even dismantling it. The weakening of European integration will enable Russia to strengthen its bilateral relations with the European countries, such that each country can act according to its own national interest rather than the interest of the EU (whose decisions are influenced by the larger countries, most of whom view Russia as a major security threat).[23]

The Radical Right and Israel

The relations between Israel and the radical right parties in Europe are complicated due to the anti-Semitic history common to many of them. There are rightist parties in Europe that oppose the very existence of the State of Israel for open anti-Semitic reasons, including the Golden Dawn in Greece, which makes use of Nazi symbols and whose members are declared Holocaust deniers. In 2016, one of the party's members of Parliament, Christopher Pappas, called Israel "an eternal enemy of Greece and Orthodoxy."[24]

At the same time, many radical right parties support Israel enthusiastically. One of the common denominators between Israel and the radical right parties is the opposition to the spread of Islam in Europe. As the Muslim issue became increasingly prominent on the radical right agenda, the support for Israel, which is considered to be the first line of defense against the spread of Islam, has grown. For example, Geert Wilders declared in 2010 that "If Jerusalem falls into the hands of the Muslims, Athens and Rome will be next. Thus, Jerusalem is the main front protecting the West."[25] Wilders is

not an exception. Support for Israel that is based on the fight against Islam is common to the radical right parties in Austria, France, Hungary, and other countries.[26]

Apart from the issue of the struggle against Islam, support for Israel serves to "purify" the radical right parties whose roots lie in the neo-Nazi or neo-fascist movement. With the goal of attracting new audiences, they have tried to distance themselves from their anti-Semitic past and to express support for Israel. For example, Marine Le Pen declared in April 2017 "that the EU parliament made a mistake by supporting the BDS movement."[27] Even a leader that is considered to be anti-Semitic, such as Gabor Wona, the chairman of the Hungarian Jobbik party, who declared in 2013 at a demonstration against the World Jewish Congress that "the Israeli conquerors…should look for another country in the world for themselves,"[28] has moderated his position and declared that "in [the] future, Jobbik would treat Israel like any other nation…we naturally respect its right to exist, form its own identity and opinions and articulate its interests.[29]

Consequently, it cannot be said that the growing strength of the radical right parties in Europe may harm bilateral relations between the countries of Europe and Israel. Indeed, in view of the consistent criticism of Israel voiced by the traditional parties in Europe and by the EU itself due to the stalled peace process with the Palestinians and the construction of settlements in the West Bank, the growth of the radical right parties and their influence may lead to the "defrosting" of relations between Israel and the governments of Europe. At the same time and in light of the anti-Semitic roots of most of the radical right parties and their pro-Russia stance in foreign policy, it appears that this is an alliance based on passing interests rather than a strategic partnership.

Conclusions

The rise of the radical right parties in Europe is a fact, and is evident in almost all of the EU countries. This trend has implications, both for the domestic policy of those countries, and in particular for the issues of human rights and immigration, as well as foreign policy. The growing electoral power of the radical right parties has influenced the centrist parties to adopt more rigid policies on the issues of trade, borders, and immigration, with the goal of denying the right further electoral gains at their expense. Thus far, the

rise of the radical right has not enabled it to win any of the elections held in recent years.

At the same time, there is no reason to assume that the radical right parties will return to the political margins any time soon. Their significant bases of electoral support have proven to be politically committed. New political shocks, such as the acceleration of immigration, an economic crisis, or an extension of the current recession will provide them with the opportunity to achieve a significant political victory. Added to these factors is ever-present Russia. The Kremlin will apparently continue to assist the parties on the right through various means, including psychological warfare and the use of the social media.

Notes

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