



The State of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe

Since the 1980s, a family of political parties, often labeled “Extreme Right” or “Far Right”, has made significant inroads in Western Europe. Common to nearly all of these parties is a strong opposition to immigration (particularly non-European immigration), a willingness to exploit cultural tensions between Muslims and others, and a populist discourse pitting “the people”, who they claim to represent, against political elites. There are also significant differences. Some, like the Norwegian Progress Party, started out as anti-tax movements and promoted market liberal economics; others, like the French Front National, tend to adopt an anti-neoliberal stance. Some, such as the Austrian Freedom Party, have neo-Nazi or anti-Semitic histories; others, like the PVV in the Netherlands, are ostensibly motivated by a desire to protect “Enlightenment values”. But regardless of these distinctions, most of these so-called Extreme Right Parties (ERPs) have grown remarkably over the past three decades.

Outside these party politics, a number of Extreme Right street movements have also flourished in the past decade. In the UK, France, and Italy these movements have been associated with civil disruption and violence. In addition, a small number of Extreme Right activists have recently carried out politically motivated atrocities.

This brief focuses mainly on Western Europe, since ERPs in Central and Eastern Europe are significantly different in nature and operate in party systems that prevent straightforward comparisons across East and West – and, for the most part, appear to pose a lesser threat. (This does not mean that views associated with ERPs are less common in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe, however – in fact, some research suggests the opposite is true.¹) An important exception is the situation in Hungary, which we will deal with separately.

The Current State of ERPs: An Overview

The present fortunes of ERPs in Western Europe are mixed. While many are on the rise, and have been for a number of years (and sometimes decades), others are stagnating and a few are even in decline. The Austrian Freedom Party, the True Finns, the Sweden Democrats, and the Dutch PVV have all surged in recent years. LAOS in Greece and the Lega Nord in Italy have also done well, and have tried to play their countries’ economic difficulties to their advantage. The Front National in France expects a promising position ahead of the country’s presidential elections in May (a contest in which they have done particularly well since the late 1980s).

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On the other hand, the Danish People's Party, the Norwegian Progress Party and the Swiss People's Party have performed consistently well at past national elections but the political tide seems to be turning against them. The British National Party and the NPD in Germany are still polling weakly, despite gains in the past decade. Belgium's Vlaams Belang has recently seen its support decline.

Countries to Watch

France

Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the Front National (FN) in 1972. Le Pen was a reviled figure for many in the mainstream. His racist remarks and flippant characterizations of the Holocaust provoked outrage. Nevertheless, his party chose immigration as an issue of choice in the mid-1980s and moved to make significant electoral breakthroughs while consolidating its position in the 1990s. In 2002 Le Pen shockingly beat Lionel Jospin, the Socialist prime minister, in the second round of the presidential elections by winning 16.9% of the vote. He then lost the second round by a wide margin once both mainstream parties called on voters to abstain from supporting him.² The FN vote subsequently fell, and in the 2007 presidential election Le Pen received 10.4% of the vote. This, it appears, was due in part to Nicolas Sarkozy, the center right candidate who won the election, tacking to the right on issues like immigration to woo FN voters back to the mainstream. But in 2010 the FN did better than expected in the French regional elections, and as Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, took the reins of the party in early 2011, it gained momentum. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership the FN has undergone a process of detoxification. She has ridded the party of anti-Semitic messaging, styling herself as a defender of France's republican values from Islamic extremism. This strategy paid off in the first round of the 2011 cantonal elections, where the FN won 15.1% of the vote.

The May 2012 French presidential election offers the first big test for the FN under its new leadership. Marine Le Pen is hoping to capitalize on economic worries and Euroscepticism amid the Eurozone crisis, arguing for protectionism and for France to leave the Euro and the EU, decrying the political elites' obsession with Europe and market economics, and criticizing Sarkozy for sacrificing the French people at the altar of credit rating agencies.³ It is nearly impossible for Marine Le Pen to win the election, since even if she does make it to the second round both main parties would unite against her, as they did against her father in 2002. But her presence in the elections is important for two reasons. Firstly, she may come ahead of one of the two (current) front-runners, Sarkozy or Hollande, to enter the second round of the election in a re-run of the 2002 election. If this were to happen, it would again send shockwaves across France and the rest of Europe, skewing the result of the second round in the same way as in 2002 (where Chirac's score of 82% was a pure result of the anomaly). A recent poll puts her at 21.5%, 2.5 points behind Sarkozy and 5.5 points behind Hollande, and polls tend to underestimate the FN vote.⁴ Secondly, Sarkozy seems to be trying to capture voters from Le Pen in order to save himself from defeat – a strategy that appeared to work well in 2007. This recently manifested itself on the 600th anniversary of the Joan of Arc, a

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symbol for the FN, where both Sarkozy and Le Pen held rival commemorations in what was perceived as a battle for nationalist votes.⁵

Finland

In Finland, the rise of the Finns Party – formerly known as the True Finns – has been particularly dramatic. Founded in 1995 upon the disbanding of the populist Finnish Rural Party, its current leader is Timo Soini. The central platform of the Finns is Euroscepticism. Soini has railed against EU “squanderers”, opposing bailouts for Greece and Portugal.⁶ But the party also promotes traditional social-conservative values and a strict immigration policy, combined with left-wing economics. It is one of the most moderate ERPs in Western Europe. Soini studied populism at university and styles himself as standing up for the “little guy”.⁷⁸

Having languished in the polls for years – in the 2007 parliamentary election they won 4.1% of the vote – the Finns Party unexpectedly received 19.1% of the vote in the 2011 parliamentary election after campaigning against Eurozone bailouts. It won 39 seats in the Finnish parliament, nearly eight times the number it had previously. After negotiations with the other main parties, the Finns did not enter the governing coalition.⁹ In a recent Taloustutkimus opinion poll, conducted in December 2011, the Finns ranked as the second most popular political party in Finland, with 19.9% of voters’ support. However, this is down from a peak of 23.0% in June, suggesting it has lost some political momentum.¹⁰

The Finnish Presidential elections were held on January 22, and Soini was beaten by the conservative candidate Sauli Niinistö, who won by securing 62% of the vote in the crucial second round of the ballot.¹¹

The Netherlands

The Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid or PVV) is fronted by Geert Wilders, notorious for his controversial attacks on Islam, his charismatic style, and his peroxide blonde hair. Wilders founded the party in 2004, aiming to capture the vote of the late populist leader Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002 by an animal rights activist.¹² The PVV focuses on immigration and Islam, criticizing the latter as a threat to Enlightenment values. It has proposed a ban on mosques, a tax on headscarves, and no further immigration from Islamic countries. Wilders’ rhetoric is highly provocative: he has compared the Koran to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and has said, “I don’t hate Muslims. I hate their book and their ideology”. Wilders was charged for inciting hatred and discrimination against Muslims with his incendiary comments, but he was acquitted last year.

In the 2010 general election, the PVV won 15.5% of the vote and 24 out of 150 seats, compared to 5.9% and nine seats in 2006. The Dutch minority coalition government – led by the center right VVD – relies on the PVV for support, and has promised to implement

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stricter immigration laws in return. Recently Wilders has aimed to capitalize on the Eurozone crisis, commissioning an investigation into the financial consequences of the Netherlands returning to the guilder.¹³ Recent polls show the PVV vying for second place in the polls with the Socialist Party, having fallen back slightly since October 2011, where it was almost tied for first place with the VVD.¹⁴

Other Key Countries

In Austria and Sweden, Extreme Right Parties have seen their support strengthen. The FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party), led by Heinz Christian Strache, has recovered the support it lost after entering into a coalition government with the Austrian People's Party in 1999, which resulted in a dramatic fall from 26.9% of the vote in the 1999 national election to 10.0% of the vote in 2002. The Extreme Right vote was split between the FPÖ and the BZÖ in 2008 – where combined the two parties achieved nearly 30% of the vote, but individually they achieved only 17.5% and 10.7% respectively. But following the death in 2008 of Jörg Haider¹⁵, the charismatic leader of the BZÖ, the FPÖ has returned to predominance. A recent poll shows the FPÖ in second place at 27%, only two points behind the center left SPÖ.¹⁶

The Sweden Democrats' support has also been growing, though more steadily. Led by Jimmie Åkesson and modeled on the anti-immigration Danish People's Party, the party's support rose from 2.9% in the 2006 parliamentary election to 5.7% in the 2010 parliamentary election. For the first time since its inception in 1988, the party received enough votes to enter parliament. A recent poll places it in fourth place at 6.9%.¹⁷

In Greece and Italy – two of the countries that have suffered the most during the on-going Eurozone debt crisis – the Extreme Right are also in strong positions. In Greece, LAOS, the Popular Orthodox Rally, has slowly increased its vote in the last three national elections, going from 2.2% in 2004 to 3.8% in 2007 to 5.6% in 2009. It entered parliament in 2007, and in 2011 became a member of the three-party coalition government established in order to stop Greece from defaulting on its debts. Its leader, Giorgos Karatzaferis, known for his policy U-turns, was reported to have had a “significant” role in forming the coalition.¹⁸ A recent poll puts LAOS at 6.2%, as well as Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), a more extreme party, for the first time on approximately 1%.^{19,20}

Italy is a particularly interesting case; the neo-Fascist party, the Italian Social Movement (MSI), converted to post-fascism as it mutated into the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale) and then into the center-right Future and Freedom Party under the expert leadership of Gianfranco Fini, now one of Italy's most respected politicians. But Italy's other Extreme Right party has not made such inroads into mainstream territory; the regionalist and economically libertarian Lega Nord, under the leadership of Umberto Bossi, has seen increases in support over the past few elections, from 3.9% in the Chamber of Deputies election in 2001 to 8.3% in 2008, where it became a coalition partner in Berlusconi's government. But in comparison to LAOS, the Lega Nord has

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taken a markedly different approach to the introduction of a technocrat government. Since Berlusconi was forced to resign, the Lega Nord welcomed a return to the opposition benches, and has been strongly critical of Mario Monti's government.²¹ The party is currently polling at 9.8%.²²

In Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland ERPs have had sustained electoral support for a long period, but political momentum is currently not going in their direction. Led by Pia Kjaersgaard since 1996, the strongly anti-immigration Danish People's Party has received around 13% of the vote in the past few elections, and is the third largest political party in Denmark, providing support to the right-leaning coalition government from 2001 to 2011. The 2011 parliamentary elections did not play in its favor, where, apart from losing three seats, it lost its role as kingmaker in parliament after the formation of a left-wing majority.²³

The anti-tax and anti-immigration Norwegian Progress Party became Norway's second largest party in 2005. In 2009, under the leadership of Siv Jensen, it increased its vote very slightly to reach 22.9%. Support has fallen since then according to a recent poll, which puts it at 15.3%.²⁴ The Norwegian massacre in July 2011 placed the party in the spotlight, since the killer, Anders Breivik, was previously a member. Jensen distanced the party from Breivik, describing his views as "nightmare-like paranoid visions" and striving to promote the values of democracy and tolerance.²⁵

The Swiss People's Party has received around 26-29% of the vote in the past few elections, and is the largest party in Switzerland. It rules in coalition with the other three main parties. The de facto leader of the party is its vice president Christoph Blocher. Support for the party fell slightly in the October 2011 National Council elections – from 28.9% to 26.6%. This was a disappointing result, as it had hoped to win at least 30% of the vote. It also did poorly in the senate elections, resulting in calls for a change of leadership.²⁶

In Germany, Belgium, and the UK ERPs are in weaker positions. The neo-Nazi NPD in Germany has received less than 2% of the vote in the past three national elections. Upon the discovery towards the end of 2011 of a neo-Nazi cell in Germany that murdered ten people, German interior ministers seek to ban the NPD for the second time.²⁷ Die Freiheit – a new, more moderate German party founded by René Stadtkewitz and modeled on Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands – has so far struggled to make an impact.²⁸ In the UK the British National Party, led by Nick Griffin, has seen increases in its vote share in national elections – from 0.2% in 2001 to 1.9% in 2010 – but its performance at recent local elections has been poor, and it has been subject to money problems, infighting, and legal battles.^{29,30} In Belgium the Vlaams Belang – an ERP led by Bruno Valkeniers that campaigns for independence for Flanders – has seen its support fall from a peak of 24.2% in the 2004 Flemish parliamentary elections to 15.3% in 2009. This has been attributed to an increase in support for the New Flemish Alliance, a more moderate party also seeking Flemish independence.

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Hungary – A Special Case

Jobbik is an anti-Roma and staunchly nationalist party founded in 2003. Its current leader is Gabor Vona.³¹ Critics accuse it of thinly veiled anti-Semitism. It rails against “gypsy crime” and political corruption.³² In the 2010 parliamentary election, it took 16.7% of the vote and came in third place, a dramatic increase from its performance in 2006, where it won only 2.2%. A recent poll puts them at 22%.³³ In 2007, Vona co-founded the Magyar Garda, a uniformed paramilitary group, which was then banned in 2009.^{34,35} Similar groups still exist, however, and there are reports of some members harassing the Roma community during their patrols.³⁶

Perhaps of more immediate danger, however, is the leading right-wing Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, which won 53% of the vote in 2010 and over two-thirds of the seats in the Hungarian parliament. This has allowed them to push through an authoritarian and anti-liberal agenda. Fidesz has designed and implemented a new constitution, allowing it to fill positions in the judiciary with its own supporters, gerrymander the electoral system, and give a board of Fidesz’s allies the power to fine media organizations that it determines are unbalanced. This has led some commentators to observe that Hungary is “sliding into authoritarianism”.³⁷

Street Movements

The past decade has seen the surfacing of a series of Extreme Right street movements. A discussion of three of the largest groups follows.

In 2009 Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (also known as Tommy Robinson) formed the “United People of Luton” in response to a march by the Muslim extremist group Al-Muhajiroun. This led to the emergence of the English Defense League (EDL). The EDL states one of its main goals is to fight Islamic extremism, and it regularly organizes street demonstrations. The leadership claims the group is inclusive and non-racist, but this is at times inconsistent with comments made by activists. Much of the EDL’s activism takes place online on its Facebook page. A number of the demonstrations have ended in violence. The British government has banned marches where it perceives there is a threat, limiting the EDL to organizing “static” demonstrations instead.³⁸ There are reports that the EDL will join forces with the British Freedom Party and compete in future elections.³⁹ Despite reports of infighting⁴⁰, the EDL are now planning to expand their campaigning strategy to include new English towns.⁴¹

Bloc Identitaire (Identity Block) is a French organization led by Fabrice Robert. The group, founded in 2003, forms part of a wider “Identity Movement” that includes a number of regionalist groups in France. Bloc Identitaire aims to promote and protect French and regional identities. It protests against the Islamization of France, and organizes a variety of street demonstrations and campaigns. These have included wine and pork gatherings and an initiative that distributed pork soup at soup kitchens. It

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appears these activities are designed to exclude Muslims, since Islam forbids the eating of pork.⁴²

CasaPound Italia is an Italian neo-fascist street movement that takes its name from the writer Ezra Pound, a well-known supporter of Mussolini. It reportedly has around 5,000 members. The group campaigns for cheaper housing, with the occupation of unused buildings as one of its campaign methods is the. It is also strongly anti-immigration. Additionally, the group has been connected with a number of violent incidents. Despite this, it has influence with the local authority in Rome, where some of its supporters are key officials.⁴³

Violence

A number of violent acts by individuals or small groups have also received attention in the past year. On July 22, 2011 the 32 year-old Anders Breivik murdered 77 people in two attacks in Norway – a bomb in Oslo, followed by a shooting spree on the island of Utøya, where his targets were young Norwegian Labor Party activists.⁴⁴ Breivik released a manifesto online before the attack entitled “2083: A European Declaration of Independence”, where he spoke of defending Europe from increasing “Islamization” and attacked multiculturalism and the “cultural Marxists” that had encouraged it.⁴⁵ ERPs in Western Europe distanced themselves from Breivik with a few notable exceptions, such as the Lega Nord MEP Mario Borghezio, who expressed agreement with some of the ideas in Breivik’s manifesto.⁴⁶

Later in 2011, members of a neo-Nazi cell in Germany were charged for murdering ten people, most of them Turkish immigrants, over a period of seven years. Also, in Florence, Italy, a supporter of CasaPound Italia shot and killed two Senegalese street vendors in broad daylight. CasaPound Italia distanced themselves from the murders.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Out of the countries surveyed, it is right-wing populism in Hungary that poses the greatest threat: the anti-Roma Jobbik is polling at 22%, the authoritarian Fidesz is currently in power, and Hungary’s democratic institutions are in peril. But the Extreme Right in France, Finland and the Netherlands should also be monitored closely. Another party to watch is the Austrian Freedom Party, which is polling strongly and looks to be in a good position for the next Austrian elections.

More generally, there has been much coverage of the apparent rise of the Extreme Right during the recession and the current Eurozone crisis. This is misleading, since many ERPs were in strong positions before the financial crisis and others have struggled in recent years. It is true that some ERPs have successfully capitalized on the Eurozone crisis – most notably the Finns, but in few countries have ERPs seen a significant boost in support within the past year. This does not mean we should dismiss the possibility of

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economic troubles contributing to a rise in the Extreme Right, but we should treat it with caution.

Possibly a greater threat than the advancement of particular political organizations is the ascendancy of a new kind of thinking – the populist mind-set. A combination of high levels of anxiety about immigration, a growing sense of economic unfairness, and low levels of trust in political institutions could lead to countries turning in on themselves and an increase in unreflective, “common-sense” thinking in the political arena. This is a danger regardless of whether it is manifested through the growth of Extreme Right Parties.

Electoral data are taken from national government websites and the European Electoral Database.

The main source for background information is:

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