

The European Union and the Mainstreaming of the Radical Right

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ABSTRACT *Radical right wing parties have been increasingly effective in challenging and eroding this consensus, using a redemptive sovereigntist platform to ‘take back control’ from the EU in a number of important policy areas. Their electoral gains, but more importantly their growing agenda-setting momentum, have combined with an alarming hardening of attitudes in large sectors of the political and social mainstream in the same sovereigntist direction. Unless the EU shifts the discussion effectively and convincingly, addressing the causes of citizen resentment without adopting the language and logic of the right wing populists, its future as a united, politically relevant block looks uncertain.*

Violent Extremism and the Crisis of Liberal Values

What we nowadays call the European Union (EU) has changed dramatically in the 51 years of its existence. It has grown in members, expanded geographically, and developed institutionally. It has also become far more complex, cumbersome even, and more far-reaching than perhaps any of its initial founders would have ever dared to hope. Yet something central has, in theory, remained the same: the EU has always been –and continues to be– rooted in a set of values that derive from the post-war liberal

consensus. Democracy, pluralism, pacifism, respect for individual human rights, freedom of movement, an institutional setup geared towards greater supranational integration, a new model of mixed sovereignty that pointed, however tentatively, in a post-national direction¹ –these and other similar values have been considered and treated as belonging to the genetic makeup of the EU.

But what happens when this consensus is facing its most serious, concerted challenge, from within the EU as well as from outside? The world that we inhabit in 2018 is dizzyingly different from the one that many took for granted only a de-

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Far right party leaders from Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, the UK, France, Belgium and Poland hold a press conference to announce a new grouping of European far right parties, called Europe of Nations and Freedom, on June 16, 2015.

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cade ago. As one of the European Commission's Vice-Presidents, the former Prime Minister of Finland, Jyrki Katainen, noted recently, the rise of Euroscepticism now poses an existential threat to the EU.² It is not just Brexit or even the avalanche of statistics over the last years pointing to declining trust in the Union.³ Instead, the rise of populist parties of various political shades in many EU member states, some of which have now entered the government or may do so in the near future, has cast a grave shadow on the continuing commitment to these liberal values.⁴ Meanwhile, the worldwide financial and refugee crises, as well as the recent backsliding into protectionism,⁵ have put unprecedented strain on the principles of solidarity and free movement that constitute the pillars of European integration. From the viewpoint of 2018, it seems that Eu-

rope and the wider world are moving decisively towards a period of reassertion of an ever more narrow and exclusive national sovereignty.⁶

It is the non-mainstream right that has attracted the bulk of analysts' attention in this regard. This broad, diverse family extends from radical, populist and anti-establishment but non-violent organized parties of the right, to clandestine terrorist individuals and groups fighting their own version of culture wars on the terrain of ultra-nationalism, anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism, anti-globalization, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic identity politics.⁷

There have been growing concerns about the threat posed by far right violence, whether coming from organized movements, informal networks or individuals.⁸ Especially since the

turn of the new millennium, the threat of violent radicalization has received fresh attention, especially in light of the terrorist attacks that illustrated its highly destructive potential and complex transnational links. Taken together with the appreciable rise in instances of hate speech and in violent incidents against vulnerable groups, it is now feared that we may be witnessing a much broader and more profound ‘reverse wave’ toward more intolerance, exclusion, and normalization of violent extremism in contemporary societies.⁹ For too long played down or ignored by the EU and national governments alike, the danger of violent far right extremism has recently come to be recognized as one of the most significant existential threats to the Union and its member states.¹⁰

Yet it is the challenge posed by the radical, non-violent parties of the non-mainstream right that has been making the most of the headlines in recent years. These parties are becoming increasingly successful in a number of critical fields, from securing a high(er) share of the popular vote and entering government, to influencing the political agenda and shifting social attitudes. Their vision of a nativist, ‘fortress’ Europe, nationalist and mono-cultural, made up of fully sovereign nation-states, has been steadily gaining traction among disaffected voters. As a result, the European political and social mainstream has been shifting in a sovereigntist direction that challenges 60 of European integration and casts a shadow on its future prospects.

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The Rise and the Continuing Rise of the Radical Right

Until recently, the rise of the radical right was largely presented in terms of an unfolding threat rather than a concrete reality. These parties tended to poll better in local, regional, and European elections while usually falling short in national ones. For example, in the most recent (2014) elections for the European Parliament, the ‘Europe of Freedom and (Direct) Democracy’ group grew from 34 to 45 MEPs, while strong parliamentary constituencies of the radical right now appear in the ‘Independents’ group with a cumulative strength of 52 MEPs. Parties of the radical/populist right polled very strongly in a large number of European countries and delivered a political ‘earthquake,’ coming first in France and Britain while increasing their share of the vote in Greece, Hungary, Italy, and elsewhere.¹¹

Since 2014, however, parties of the radical right have made their presence felt more emphatically in the electoral field, including countries where they were previously unsuccessful or under-represented. The landscape changed dramatically after more recent elections in Austria (where the Freedom Party secured 26 percent in 2017), France (where Marine Le Pen received 21.30 percent and 33.90 percent in the two rounds of the 2017 presidential elections), Hungary (where Jobbik scored 19 percent in 2018), Germany (where the Alternative for Germany nearly trebled its vote to 12.6 percent), and more recently Italy (where the Lega's share of the vote climbed to 17.37 percent, in addition to the anti-establishment Five-Star Movement's 32.66 percent). In hindsight, the respite in right wing ascension signaled by the victory of the centrist, pro-EU Emmanuel Macron in France¹² and the collapse of electoral support for the right wing UKIP (from 12.8 percent in 2015 to 1.8 percent)¹³ proved temporary and not enough to change the dynamics of the overall trend of populist parties of the right making significant inroads at the expense of traditional mainstream parties of the previously dominant liberal, globalist, and pro-EU consensus.

What is particularly striking is the disproportionate impact of this upward trend for the radical right on the traditional mainstream political parties. In the last decade, there has been a dramatic collapse of support for the center-left in many European countries. Many social democratic

parties that had dominated the political scene in previous decades have seen their electoral appeal decline dramatically (as in the case of the Socialist Party in France and Spain, the Democratic Party in Italy, and the Social Democrats in Germany) or collapse altogether (as happened in Greece, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands).¹⁴ In comparison, the recent electoral fortunes of the center-right paint a significantly more mixed picture: the decline of Silvio Berlusconi's party in Italy and the Republicans in France has been matched by a growing share of the vote for the Austrian People's Party (from 24.5 percent to 31.7 percent), the Law and Justice Party in Poland (up 7.69 percent to 37.58 percent), and even more impressively the Hungarian ruling Fidesz (49.5 percent in 2018, up 4.40 percent).

The Ideological Porosity between Radical and Mainstream Right

It is far from a coincidence that the nominally center-right parties that bucked the trend of mainstream electoral retrenchment have benefited from a hardening of their ideological platform towards immigration, Islam, globalization, and European integration.¹⁵ The case of Hungary is the most instructive in this respect. In the midst of the 2015 refugee crisis, the Hungarian government decided to erect a long 'border barrier' along the country's frontier with Serbia and Croatia. While the barrier proved effective in halting the refugee flows into Hungary and diverting

them to other parts of the continent it also staged a theatrical performance of sovereignty as permanent security ‘reassurance’ to Hungarian citizens. Meanwhile, in spite of a ruling by the European Court of Justice calling on the Hungarian and Slovak governments to implement a 2015 quota agreement for the relocation of refugees inside the Schengen Area, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has refused to implement it, citing security and identity concerns in relation to the refugees.¹⁶ Thus, in spite of threats from the European Commission to sue the two member-state governments, Hungary has successfully defied its international commitments as a member of the EU and has used the issue to stage a spectacle of national sovereignty on its borders. As Orbán said after his recent election triumph, “the election result [shows] that Hungarians have decided that only they can decide with whom they want to live in Hungary and the government will stick to this position.”¹⁷ Empowered by his 2018 triumphant re-election, Orbán could effectively claim that he was clawing back sovereign control from distant (European and global) or invisible (the ‘stop Soros’ campaign, merging anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim stereotypes)¹⁸ elites on behalf of Hungarian and indeed European people.

Still, Hungary may be the most extreme example of an otherwise increasingly common political-ideological shift. The recent victory of Miloš Zeman in the Czech presidential elections was largely attributed

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to the hardening of his campaign’s Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and anti-Islam political messages in the run-up to the second round of the election.¹⁹ The victory of the conservative Sebastian Kurz in Austria was largely attributed to his successful re-fashioning as “anti-immigration millennial”²⁰ and his emphatic rightward ideological shift.²¹ Meanwhile, even the electoral resilience of the UK Conservative party –surprising for a party in its ninth year in power after a prolonged period of harsh austerity– has been attributed to a significant extent to its anti-immigration stance and Brexit credentials that have mitigated its earlier ideological distance from UKIP.²²

The Post-Liberal Moment?

Back in 1999, when the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) scored a spectacular 27 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections and even-

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tually joined the government, the notion of an impenetrable *cordon sanitaire* around extremist parties (effectively, a political ‘quarantine’ to bar them from power) was thrown into doubt.²³ The EU’s response to the shocking news that the FPÖ would lead the government of one of its member states was to impose sanctions on Austria.²⁴ This unprecedented form of censure directed at a member-state lasted only a few months, but divulged the Union’s discomfort with the Austrian precedent and its determination to defend the political safety net against any attempt to undermine or relativize it.

Since then the proverbial *cordon sanitaire* has faced many, far more demanding tests. While it has been reconfirmed in Sweden, France, Germany, and elsewhere against growing electoral challenges from the radical right, it has been perforated by a number of bespoke agreements between mainstream and radical parties in order to support national governments. The so-called Danish model

(a mainstream coalition government supported by the Danish People’s Party between 2001 and 2011) was replicated in the Netherlands in 2010-2012. Then in 2017 the ultra-nationalist United Patriots party coalition formally joined the government headed by a center-right party; and this was followed by another formal coalition agreement between the conservative Austrian People’s Party and the FPÖ in Austria in late 2017. Poignantly, even the Austrian Social Democrats dropped their ban on a coalition with the far right in the run-up to the 2017 elections.²⁵ Meanwhile, the *cordon sanitaire* has proven even less robust on the regional and local level, with mainstream parties more likely to succumb to the temptation to court the support of the radical right as the price of power.

But 2018 brought an unprecedented challenge to the very foundations of the post-war quarantine against right wing extremist parties. The safety net assumed that the final decision would always rest on a mainstream party topping the polls –or at least a stable coalition of mainstream parties that could still block or mitigate the radical right’s access to power. The results of the Italian parliamentary elections marked such an extraordinary swing of votes to non-mainstream political parties (together the M5S and the Lega received just over 50 percent of the national vote), making possible a majority power arrangement that could exclude the traditional political forces of the center-right and the center-left.²⁶ The new government agreement between M5S’s Luigi Di



German Chancellor Merkel speaks to parliamentary group co-leaders of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany Alice Weidel and Alexander Gauland during a session at the Bundestag on June 28, 2018.

JOHN MACDOUGALL / AFP / Getty Images

Maio and the Lega's Matteo Salvini means that the post-war safety net has been rendered de facto irrelevant, since mainstream parties in Italy can no longer perform their expected role as gatekeepers of executive power. Meanwhile, the collapse of the vote of the ruling Democratic Party on the center-left was matched by the decline of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which lost its status as senior partner in the right wing coalition.²⁷

Whether this extreme scenario constitutes an anomaly or is likely to replicate itself in other EU member states remains to be seen. There are, however, powerful warning signs that the so-called post-war liberal consensus has been waning. Put simply, it is becoming less and less possible to maintain the conventional fiction that mainstream society is irreversibly committed to liberal democracy,

human rights, globalization, diversity, and pluralism. Until recently, the focus of attention was firmly on the electoral strengthening of the radical right and the strategies needed to effectively defend the liberal status quo from the radical right's corrosive ideological effect. Comparatively less attention was being paid to the underlying creeping political *convergence* between mainstream and radical programs – a convergence that Péter Krekó has described as mainstreaming of the extreme *and* extremization of the mainstream.²⁸ The vicious circle is hard to ignore: as new political entrepreneurs of the radical right have been refining their message and embracing new communication techniques to reach new audiences, the mainstream political class has found it increasingly tempting to co-opt radical-right parties and/or their ideas in an attempt

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to diffuse the challenge posed by the radicals to their power and ideological hegemony.²⁹ But recent developments across the EU member states –not to mention the U.S.– point to a new stage in this creeping convergence: a popular revolt against the tired liberal political class *and* their fundamental ideas.³⁰

Sovereignism as the Banner of the Revolt

The outcome of the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership in the EU was the first milestone in this revolt against the mainstream and its assumed liberal, globalist consensus. 'Take back control,' the rallying cry of the Leave campaign, proved so effective because it offered an actionable vision of collective empowerment on behalf of a narrowly re-defined national community.³¹ This vision was a reassuring substitute for the perceived atomization of contemporary society and the authoritarian procliv-

ities of the global economic system.³² With one blow, 'take back control' rejected, convincingly as it turned out, the very foundations of the EU's *raison d'être* –supra-nationalism, pooling of sovereignty, porous borders, trans-national mobility and cultural diversity.

Sovereignty has thus become the vanishing point of the radical right's program and of the growing popular revolt against the tired post-war liberal consensus. This is because it subsumes an array of issues that have steadily climbed up the list of priorities for European electorates –immigration and control of borders; democratic accountability; fears of status vis-à-vis cultural, religious, ethnic and other minorities; unease with multiculturalism and globalization. This is precisely where many radical right wing parties have met and joined forces with an increasingly more receptive social audience, long alienated by the promises of liberalism and European integration. This is what binds Donald Trump's "America First" slogan with Salvini's "Italians First of All" motto in the 2018 elections.³³

Why did the mirage of seizing back sovereignty prove such an effective banner for the mainstreaming of the radical right? Back in 1997, at the heyday of liberal confidence in globalization's irreversible forward march, Dani Rodrik struck a discordant note when he spoke of the danger that this same globalization was advancing much faster than our ability to govern it or indeed our capacity

to comprehend it; and that this situation was likely to generate a backlash against it.³⁴ Since then, it would seem, the mainstream ‘center’ of Europe has moved decisively from a globalization Zeitgeist to an increasingly nationalist-populist and sovereigntist one.³⁵ The distance traveled is significant but not as dramatic as it may appear at first. For beneath the surface of a confident, seemingly irreversible embrace of post-war liberal values lay a growing but previously suppressed unease, disaffection, and resentment with these very values. The radical right offered a taboo-breaking license that re-inflamed old prejudices and new anxieties, directing them at external international ‘others’ while also using them to re-define the community of ‘we’ as rooted in space and united in history.³⁶

It is not a coincidence that the recent electoral and political success of the radical right owes so much to its anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourses. These two groups have served as the targets of an increasingly ‘acceptable racism’ directed against them as perennial, dangerous ‘outsiders.’³⁷ Their exclusion is performed at the point where the international and the national collide and are forcibly demarcated – namely, at the border. The border that according to globalization theorists only two decades ago was waning or disappearing altogether as a temporary phase in the history of sovereignty, is being re-constituted as the marker of a new era of territorial national sovereignty. The sovereigntists of the radical right have come to view it as a bulwark of

a nativist, homogeneous community against incursions from people, ideas, commodities, and any other flow from the perceived ‘outside’ that could threaten the identity of their national communities and their vision of ‘Europe’ as a ‘Judeo-Christian’ fortress.³⁸

No wonder then, that during the campaign for the 2016 EU referendum in Britain, the Leave campaign used the imagery of the border as the most eloquent marker of the difference between in and out, between a crisis-ridden present and an alternative future of reclaimed popular self-determination on behalf of the territorial nation-state.³⁹ Two of its most potent visual campaigns involved the notion of a threatened national border by large numbers of refugees from Muslim countries. No wonder the Hungarian high-tech border fence has been praised by Viktor Orbán as the last line of defense for a ‘Christian Europe’ against ‘Muslim invaders.’⁴⁰ No wonder that the case of Anis Amri, the culprit of the 2016 attack on a busy market in Berlin who then traveled through the Schengen zone and was shot down in Milan a few days later, united the stars of the European radical right – from Le Pen to Salvini to Wilders – in condemnation of the EU’s internal borders policy.⁴¹

The Radical Right’s Sovereigntist Challenge to the EU

Across the EU member states, radical right parties have been refining their

Italy's Interior Minister and Deputy PM, Matteo Salvini, speaks during the annual meeting of Italy's far right party the Northern League in Pontida, northeast Milan on July 1, 2018.

MIGUEL MEDINA / AFP / Getty Images



sovereigntist message, using it as the sharp edge of their attack against national, European, and global elites. Claiming to represent, and respond to, the authentic voice of 'the people,' their calls for radical change cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the 'elitist' national political systems and forms of governance. In addition, however, their horizon is increasingly inter- and trans-national. This underlines the significance of their confrontation with the EU, its institutions, and its operating principles. In directing the bulk of their challenge at the EU, they correctly recognize the symbolic status of the institution as the poster child of the kind of post-sovereigntism that they are determined to challenge and reverse. This reflects the ambition of their campaign as a two-pronged attack – one focusing on national issues, the other reaching further and more am-

bitiously into the international and indeed global domain.

It is thus no coincidence that the forces of the radical right in Europe have cultivated increasingly closer transnational political links in recent years. In May 2018, some of Europe's radical right wing parties were hosted by Marine Le Pen in Nice.⁴² After years of trying in vain to form a coalition of like-minded radical anti-establishment nationalist parties in the European Parliament,⁴³ Le Pen managed to bring together Wilders and Salvini (the latter via video) with FPÖ's MEP Harald Vilimsky and Tomio Okamura, leader of the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party in the Czech Republic. Together they launched a joint anti-immigration campaign that struck at the heart of the EU's immigration and Schengen policy.⁴⁴ Their alternative, 'a union of

independent nations,' has remained a sovereigntist anti-utopia of Euro-sceptic forces across Europe since the 1980s. What has changed is the ideological conflation of sovereigntism with layers of transnational anti-immigration and anti-Muslim discourses. The converging stereotypes of the immigrant, the refugee, and the Muslim as existential threats to western civilization have helped the radical right to 'mainstream' its core political message. But the same stereotypes have also underpinned an ideological and attitudinal shift towards more extreme positions on immigration and religious/cultural diversity at the very heart of mainstream society.

This dramatic shift of the radical right towards the mainstream is now far more worrying for the EU than the prospect of any formal grouping of Europe's notoriously fractious radical right wing parties in the European Parliament. It is worrying because it points to the reality of a deep social demand for a sovereigntist alternative platform to the conventional liberal mainstream; and because it poses a direct challenge to the core values behind the Union's key political experiments since the 1980s. The EU has been forced into an increasingly defensive position of having to justify its contemporary relevance in the face of growing dissent even within political and social mainstream constituencies. The role of the radical right in facilitating this reversal over the last three decades cannot be exaggerated.

There are increasing calls for the EU and its mainstream political pillars

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across all member states to learn from the successes of the populists of the radical right.⁴⁵ This is wise counsel – so long as it points to the need for re-thinking how the values of diversity, respect for difference, human rights, and international cooperation can be made more relevant to the needs and expectations of contemporary voters. The world today is very different from that of the 1980s (when the union's current institutional foundations were put in place), let alone the 1950s. Years of assumed ideological hegemony for the sort of post-sovereigntist, supranational globalizing liberalism championed by the EU have bred complacency and blunted reflexes. Significant momentum was squandered after the turn of the new century on projects that appeared too centralizing, too distant or even vain to European citizens. Simply clinging to the status quo is no longer a viable option. After managing one crisis after another for the last decade, the EU must at long last use its power at the service of a new, positive and inspiring future for its citizens.⁴⁶ This may involve a shake-up in terms of its immediate priorities, its key figures, and

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perhaps as importantly, the ways in which it communicates and interacts with European citizens.

This is a meaningful medium-term strategy; but it is not going to make the challenge of the radical right go away. It is likely that we have not yet reached the apex of the parabola of the populist nationalist surge in Europe. In hindsight, 2017 was little more than a lull for the liberal mainstream and the Europhiles across the continent.⁴⁷ The EU must learn to live with this challenge and prepare more effectively for the hostile questioning of its principles by the radical right in its member states. As highlighted by the ongoing key discussions about immigration and border control on both EU and national levels,⁴⁸ the political discourse will continue for some time to provide the forces of the radical right with significant opportunities for both electoral gain and agenda-setting.⁴⁹ Yet the temptation to make concessions to the 'closed,' exclusionary, nativist vision of the radical right must be resisted at all cost, even at the risk of short-term electoral loss. Unless the EU shifts the discussion effectively and

convincingly; and unless it addresses the causes of citizen resentment without adopting the language and logic of the right wing populists, its future as a dynamic and united block looks decidedly bleak. ■

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