Who's Afraid of the European Radical Right?

Cas Mudde, DePauw University
Pour plus de sécurité

Ma maison – notre Suisse

Anti-immigrant poster used by the Swiss People’s Party. The text reads, “For More Security.”
Many observers of European politics warn that democracy on the continent is in peril. Conservative authors argue that European governments are threatened by a spineless surrender to “Islamofascism,” while liberals fret that Europe is being overtaken by “ghosts of a tortured past,” that is, parties on the “far Right.” Whereas the Islamofascism argument lacks empirical substance and is mostly based on (Islamo)phobia, the “tortured past” claim is largely the result of conceptual confusion and an exaggeration of reality. Neither contemporary European democracies nor the contemporary “far Right” groups are similar to their “equivalents” in the 1930s. The contemporary populist radical Right does not dominate European politics, and democracies on the continent have been resilient in the face of this new challenge.

This is not to deny the current electoral strength of populist radical right parties within the European Union. For thirty years, they have been stronger than at anytime since 1945. They have also fared better than the Greens, the only other new “party family” to emerge after the 1960s.

But the populist radical Right is not antidemocratic in the formal sense; it embraces popular sovereignty and majority rule. It is, however, anti-liberal democratic; it rejects both cultural pluralism and minority rights. Both stances are consequences of nativism and populism: these parties define “the people” as a homogeneous bloc and consider “the other” both corrupt and menacing. Hence, the threat of the contemporary populist radical Right is fundamentally different from that of fascism: its advocates do not want to overthrow democracy, they want to weaken liberal checks on pure majoritarian rule.

How Popular Is the Populist Radical Right?

A little historical background: the populist radical Right emerged in the 1980s with such new parties as the French National Front (FN), the German Republicans (REP), and the Flemish Bloc in Belgium (VB). Several were created out of splits in established parties; in a few cases, entire parties turned in a populist, right-wing direction, most notably the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Swiss People’s Party (SVP).

The French FN was founded in 1972 as a coalition of far right groupuscules under the charismatic leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen. During its first decade, the party went through internal turmoil; a neofascist faction actually expelled itself. But then the Front took off. In 1983, it won a municipal election result in the town of Dreux, and, in 1986, it won almost 10 percent of the vote and thirty-five seats in the National Assembly. Over the past quarter-century, the FN has been a major player in French politics—routinely winning from 10 percent to 15 percent of the vote, notwithstanding the fact that no major party will allow the Front to participate in government.

The Austrian FPÖ was founded in 1956, as an uneasy coalition of liberals and nationalists. But in 1986, Jörg Haider, then only thirty-six, became the party’s leader. He remade the party into a bastion of the populist radical right, nudged out the liberal faction, and consistently increased the party’s appeal. In the 1999 parliamentary election, the FPÖ broke the dominance of the two mainstream parties, the conservative ÖVP and the social democratic SPÖ, and joined a coalition with
the first. Then, partly due to Haider’s reputation for making inflammatory statements, the FPÖ became involved in an internal fight. He and his most loyal supporters left to start the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ). Haider died in a car crash in 2008, and the rudderless BZÖ will undoubtedly soon follow suit. But his former party, the FPÖ, under new leader Heinz-Christian Strache, is regaining its old strength.

The Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) is one of the latest additions to the family of the populist radical right. Founded in 2005 by Geert Wilders, then a prominent member of the mainstream conservative party in the Netherlands, the PVV quickly became the third-largest party in the nation. It elected twenty-four members to the Dutch parliament in 2010 and currently supports the minority government, led by the mainstream Right in that country. Wilders’s aggressive Islamophobia is similar to that voiced by leaders of such older parties as the FN and the FPO, although for both ideological and tactical reasons Wilders eschews personal and party contacts with these “brethren.”

The mixed fortunes of the populist radical Right in France, Austria, and the Netherlands mirror the success and limits of the phenomenon in the continent as a whole. As of June 2011, populist radical right parties were represented in twelve national parliaments of the twenty-seven EU member states. But, only one is a formal member of a national government, the Northern League (LN) in Italy. Within the European Parliament, fourteen populist radical right parties are represented, yet ideological and strategic differences have prevented them from forming a united faction.

I have compiled a breakdown of all the populist radical right parties currently represented in the national parliament of an EU member state (see table below).

Notice that the average high result of the parties is less than 13 percent of the vote; while the average most recent result is just under 10 percent.

Let’s put these numbers in perspective. On the one hand, populist radical right parties now have more support than at anytime in the postwar era. Taken together, they win almost twice as many votes as do their Green Party competitors.

Moreover, virtually all European countries have multiparty systems in which the biggest party often gains no more than 25 percent to 30 percent of the vote. At the same time, the populist radical Right is represented in only a minority of the parliaments of the EU member states (44 percent to be exact). In addition, several of the represented parties reached their peak several years ago. Among those parties that gained their highest result in the last

### Electoral Results of Parliamentary Populist Right Parties as of June 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Highest Result</th>
<th>Latest Result</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>17.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Flemish Interest (VB)</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>National Union Attack (NSA)</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Danish People’ Party (DFP)</td>
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<td>13.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)</td>
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<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik)</td>
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<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Northern League (LN)</td>
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<td>8.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>National Alliance (NA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Party for Freedom (PVV)</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Greater Romania Party (PRM)</td>
<td>19.5</td>
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<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Slovak National Party (SNS)</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden Democrats (SD)</td>
<td>5.7</td>
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election, several have contested only one or two elections. Historically, few populist right-wing parties have been able to retain substantial support beyond a ten-to-fifteen-year period. Some of the strongest parties in the 1990s, such as the VB in Belgium, are now fighting to survive as a potent political force.

**Who Votes for Them and Why?**

There is, of course, no “typical” populist radical right voter. White, less educated, blue collar males do vote in disproportionate numbers for these parties, but they constitute only a minority of their constituents. And the more successful the party, the more diverse its electorate.

But these institutions are indeed Männerparteien or “male parties.” Not only are they led by men, like nearly every other party, but unlike all others, they have a significant gender gap. Nearly everywhere, the populist radical right electorate is two-thirds male—just the reverse of most Green parties, which are also their ideological opposites. A similar gender gap prevails even in those few populist radical right parties led by women, the FN in France and Denmark’s DFP.

What motivates Europeans to vote for such parties? The most popular argument in academia and the media is that they attract the so-called “losers of modernization,” those citizens who cannot deal with the insecurity created by globalization, whether cultural (immigration), economic (unemployment), or political (European integration). Although there is some truth to this, it is both too broad and too limited an explanation. Globalization affects all European nations in roughly similar ways, yet the fortunes of populist radical right parties differ significantly country by country. Modernization theory only explains the demand-side of politics; that is, why people would be attracted to a party. At least as important is the supply-side, that is, the offer of political solutions that is available to voters in a country.

The populist radical Right is partly dependent upon the behavior of mainstream parties. It has grown when and where mainstream parties ignore issues that a significant part of the population cares about deeply: crime, corruption, European integration, and immigration. Parties of the populist radical Right also benefit from the fact that every mainstream party has been a member of one or several coalition governments. This enables the populist radical Right to claim it has “clean hands” and to accuse other parties of being “all the same.”

When members of populist radical right parties do enter Parliament, becoming visible to a broader public, their own behavior becomes crucial to sustaining their electoral success. Many parties have imploded after their initial electoral success, unable to deal with the new pressures of parliamentary work and increased media scrutiny.

Essential to sustaining electoral success are three elements: leadership, organization, and propaganda. Successful populist radical right parties are led by charismatic figures, who attract new voters, and competent party managers, who build and lead the organization. Successful parties also tend to have a strong organizational presence in most of the territory they contest, and at least one large local stronghold, such as the city of Antwerp for the VB or the province of Carinthia for the FPÖ/BZÖ. Finally, influential populist radical right parties excel in propaganda, particularly the visual kind, which helps influence debate. For example, in 2007 the SVP produced a powerful poster that depicted a white sheep kicking a black sheep out of a territory marked by the Swiss flag. The slogan read, “Creating security.”

But the major significance of the populist radical Right is not as a governing force. The first time such a party entered the government of an EU member state was in 1994, when the LN joined Silvio Berlusconi in power. Since then, populist radical right parties have been only junior partners in some ten other governments of EU states. And they are all but absent in the bureaucracy of the EU, both its Parliament and its Commission. When they do join a national government, they can be successful in tightening immigration policy and expanding the power of the police, but only when their coalition partners support them.

Most important, although the populist
radical Right often engages in unsavory rhetoric, it has put no European democracy in peril. In fact, the most significant threats to representative institutions come from otherwise labeled political actors—notably the national conservative premier Victor Orbán in Hungary and his Italian counterpart, the neoliberal populist Silvio Berlusconi—who attack core democratic institutions, such as the courts and the media. The new democracies in Eastern Europe have proven quite resilient to populist radical right challenges as well; neither the League of Polish Families (LPR) in Poland (2006-2007) nor the SNS in Slovakia (2006-2010) dismantled fundamental democratic institutions, even if they did try to politically neutralize them.

There is no doubt that Europe has become less open to immigration, less accommodating to non-citizens who already reside there, and more focused on national interests and security. But these changes can be attributed more to larger factors, such as the tensions of a multicultural society, the often alienating growth of the EU, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and beyond. It was the prime ministers of Spain (José María Aznar) and Britain (Tony Blair) who pushed for a strict EU-wide immigration policy. Neither was confronted with a significant challenger on the populist radical Right. So, while “Europe’s right turn” is undoubtedly influenced by populist radical right parties, one should not overestimate their significance. In some cases, such as Britain and Germany, they have functioned merely as a convenient excuse for mainstream leaders to push through controversial legislation.

Three decades of activism by the populist radical Right have taught some hard lessons. First, it is not a “normal pathology,” alien to European democracies, but its opposite, a pathological normalcy. Populist radical right parties offer simplistic, radical variants of views shared by large pluralities, often majorities, of the population. Thus, these parties have a fertile ground in which to grow. Second, their success is mostly determined by the issues they articulate. Despite three decades of experience, most mainstream parties in Europe still do not know how to respond to the populist radical right challenge. Although their key issues (crime, corruption, European integration, immigration) are, by now, openly discussed in most countries, mainstream solutions tend to be ad hoc and non-ideological. This might lead to short-term relief, including the decrease of electoral support for the populist radical Right, but neither solves the underlying problems nor dissolves popular resentments.

Thus, the main problem in European politics today is not the electoral success of the populist radical Right. Even its most successful parties seem to have a limited shelf life, with the FN in France being one of the few potential exceptions. Unlike in the 1930s, representative democracy is the only popular kind of political system acceptable to most Europeans, including the populist radical Right.

The real threat lies in the growing frustration and insecurity that breed support for the populist radical Right. These will not disappear when its parties implode or when mainstream politicians try quick but superfluous “fixes.” Europe faces challenges at all levels—cultural, economic, social, political—many unprecedented, requiring ideological and long-term responses. Europe’s mainstream parties should go back to their forgotten ideologies and provide leadership in these challenging times. Not all will follow, and challenger parties of all varieties will continue to exist, but this is the only way that the democracy paradox can be solved structurally.

A particular responsibility lies with the mainstream Left, that is, the social democratic parties, which lost much of their traditional electorate to the populist radical Right. Many social democratic parties abandoned the working class in their search for “die neue Mitte” (the new center) and government power in the 1990s. Later, they also changed their ideological socio-economic discourse for an opportunistic socio-cultural discourse, partly catering to the “immigrant vote,” increasingly their electoral base in the main cities. It is particularly up to the social democratic parties to take issue with the ethnic discourse of the populist radical Right and stress the shared class interest of the socioeconomically weak immigrants and natives. The current economic
crisis should provide a perfect opportunity for this return to the future.

**POSTSCRIPT:** This article was written before the horrible attacks in Norway and addresses the challenge from radical right parties, not extreme-right terrorists. Regarding the latter, while extreme-right violence is a problem in some parts of Europe, it does not pose a lethal threat to European states or democracy.

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**Egypt’s Labor Pains**

For Workers, the Revolution Has Just Begun

**ARI PAUL**

This past spring, Western and Egyptian media alike attributed the explosive Tahrir Square protests to organizing by middle-class movements of students and intellectuals, battling for political freedom and armed with social media. This popular narrative holds that it was only when young people ignited a popular uprising that Egyptian workers shut down the country’s ports and public services in solidarity. But history indicates the opposite, that years of labor organizing laid the groundwork for today’s protests and will determine whether working Egyptians have a stake in the state that is emerging.

Between 1998 and the present, Egyptian workers engaged in nearly four thousand unsanctioned industrial actions. Structural readjustment from World Bank and International Monetary Fund loans in the early 1990s had led to inflation; the industrial sector downsized, and a concurrent reduction in wages raised workers’ rancor and erupted in strikes and local protests. The April 6 movement, a middle-class youth movement that was pivotal in organizing this year’s anti-Mubarak protests, takes its name from a planned labor strike in 2008 in the industrial city of el-Mahallah that was prevented by security forces. While there has been creative give and take among student and labor organizers, foreign reporters have missed the class politics within the protest, focusing instead on the international implications of Hosni Mubarak’s ouster. A different sort of internationalism has persisted among unionists from Cairo to Wisconsin, as they celebrated labor’s central role in the overthrow of a despot. A wide array of democracy activists has since successfully pressured the interim government to reject IMF funding and to dissolve the governing local councils, widely seen as tools of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party.

Still, it is increasingly evident that the new military government is about as interested in independent trade unions as was Mubarak. In June, two members of the independent teachers union, Hamala Korany and Atef Al-Gazar, were arrested during a protest demanding permanent jobs for teachers. They faced a jail sentence of one year. Union lawyers were able to get the charges dropped. State media reported June 19 that the army fired live ammunition into the air as it faced off against a group of striking Suez Canal support workers in a failed attempt the break the stoppage, which began after the Suez Canal Authority refused to implement a