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From the Selected Works of Cas Mudde

March, 2014

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/cas_mudde/75/

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The Far Right and the European Elections

CAS MUDDE

If we are to believe the international media, this is going to be the year of the “far right anti-European populists.” In the first three days of 2014, *The New York Times* published two opinion essays warning of the far right’s rise, while *The Economist* focused its first issue of the year on “Europe’s Tea Parties.” Before this came months of public warnings of a “European populist backlash” issued by prominent European Union politicians, including the presidents of the EU, the European Commission, and the European Parliament (EP), and by national politicians, such as Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta and Dutch Deputy Prime Minister Lodewijk Asscher.

While the warnings have employed different terms and point to somewhat different groups of parties and politicians, they all share at least two major messages: (1) The Great Recession has led to the rise of the far right, and (2) the far right is going to win big in the European elections of May 2014. In fact, despite the broad consensus in the media on these two points, which by now are pieces of received wisdom, the first is incorrect and the second is highly unlikely. As so often in politics, these “truths” are based on a toxic mix of conceptual stretching, faulty generalizations, and professional opportunism.

It is true that the economic crisis has caused an increase in public dissatisfaction with both European and national elites, as well as electoral losses for most governing parties in most EU member states. But there is no clear trend in the electoral fortunes of far right parties. Overall, the Great Recession has not produced a sharp rise in support for far right parties, and neither the far

right nor the “anti-European populists” are on track to win a significant victory in the upcoming European Parliament elections.

MOTLEY CREW

Terminological confusion and conceptual stretching have always muddied the debate about the far right. A plethora of terms is used to bring together a broad group of political parties. While most of the discussion, particularly in public debates, still focuses on the “far right” or “radical right,” even more ambiguous terms like “right-wing populist” and the highly problematic “anti-European populist” are rapidly gaining prominence. The latter category typically includes a motley crew of parties, such as the Dutch Socialist Party, Alternative for Germany, the Finns Party, the Italian Five Star Movement, and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

Accepting that there will never be an academic, let alone a public consensus on highly charged terms like “far right” and “populism,” let me briefly discuss my understandings of the categories. Simply stated, I use “far right” as an umbrella concept for both the extreme and radical right. The main distinction between “extreme” and “radical” has to do with acceptance of the basic tenets of democracy—that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule. While extremism rejects democracy altogether, radicalism accepts democracy but rejects *liberal* democracy—that is, pluralism and minority rights. (The main distinction between “left” and “right” is based on the propensity toward egalitarianism: The right considers key inequalities among people as natural and outside the state’s purview.)

On the basis of this conceptual framework we can distinguish the far right parties that currently have representation in the national legislatures of EU member states (see Table 1). The

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Table 1—Far Right Parties with Parliamentary Representation in EU Member States

Country	Party	Highest Result (%)	Last Result (%)
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	26.9	20.5
Belgium	Flemish Interest (VB)	12.0	7.8
Bulgaria	National Union Attack (NSA)	9.4	7.3
Croatia	Croatian Rights Party (HSP)	7.1	3.0
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DF)	13.8	12.3
France	National Front (FN)	15.3	13.6
Greece	Golden Dawn (CA)	7.0	6.9
Hungary	Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik)	16.7	16.7
Italy	Northern League (LN)	10.1	4.1
Latvia	National Alliance (NA)	7.7	13.9
Netherlands	Party for Freedom (PVV)	15.5	10.1
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)	5.7	5.7

The results are percentages of the vote from elections for the lower houses of national parliaments. The third column refers to the highest ever result in the period 1980–2013, the fourth to the most recent.

vast majority of these parties are best described as populist radical right, combining an ideological core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Briefly put, nativism is a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, holding that a country should be exclusively inhabited by members of the native group (“the nation”), and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state. Authoritarianism is the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely. Populism, finally, is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”; it argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.

The prototype of the populist radical right party is the French National Front (FN), founded in 1982, while more recent examples include the Danish People's Party (DF) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). Some prominent populist radical right parties, such as the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), started out as non-radical right parties, then radicalized as a consequence of internal party politics. Given the cultural and legal context of postwar Europe, few openly extreme right parties have achieved electoral relevance. In most cases the externally oriented party literature (for example, election manifestos) will include at least

nominal allegiance to democratic ideals, while internally oriented party documents, as well as the behavior of leading party members, will be more ambiguous or openly antidemocratic.

The most prominent case of an extreme right party is Greece's Golden Dawn (CA), which is currently threatened with a public funding ban and criminal investigations. More ambiguous cases are the virtually bankrupt British National Party and the National Democratic Party of Germany, as well as the electorally significant Hungarian Jobbik, which combines a nominally democratic party front with a clearly antidemocratic paramilitary wing, the (now outlawed) Hungarian Guard.

On some important borderline cases, even academic experts disagree. These parties exhibit various radical right features, particularly in electoral campaigns, but have a core ideology that does not seem to be radical right. The most disputed borderline cases within the EU are the Finns Party and UKIP, both of which share Euroskepticism, populism, and xenophobia, but do not seem to be fundamentally nationalist. A somewhat less contested category is best described as neoliberal populist, including parties like the Austrian Team Stronach and the Italian Forza Italia, whose ideological core is based on economic liberalism rather than cultural nationalism. Finally, there are parties that are openly Euroskeptic and/or populist, but clearly not radical right. This group includes par-

ties like Alternative for Germany and Italy's Five Star Movement.

THE GREAT RECESSION

The origins of the current economic crisis, generally referred to as the Great Recession, are by now well known. What started out as the bursting of a housing bubble and the consequent subprime mortgage debacle in the United States in 2007 had developed into a full-fledged global economic crisis by September 2008. The Great Recession is the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It has led to, among other things, record levels of bankruptcies, financial losses, and unemployment. In Europe, the crisis hit both individual states and the EU. While individually many European countries were at first only marginally affected by the crisis, collectively, through massive intra-EU bailouts, all nations have had to pay a steep price.

For many Europeans the bailouts were a shocking confrontation with the actual consequences of European integration and solidarity, creating deep resentment throughout the union, among both "payers" and "receivers." Far right parties were at the forefront of the political fight against the bailouts, though they were far from alone. But where most other politicians mainly criticized the *implementation* of the ideas of European integration and solidarity (notably the bailouts), many far right parties attacked the *essence* of the ideas. In several cases the Great Recession has even radicalized the Euroskepticism of far right parties to the point that they have come to support an EU exit for their countries: Both Marine Le Pen of the FN and Geert Wilders of the PVV suggested this in their 2012 election campaigns.

Nevertheless, the widespread idea that the Great Recession has fueled a resurgence of far right parties is based on both a historical and a contemporary misunderstanding. The received wisdom that economic crisis leads to far right success, and the consequent elimination of democracy, is based on the historical example of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party in Weimar Germany. While the predominance of the Weimar case is not surprising, Germany was the (terrible) exception rather than the rule in the interwar period. Although the number of (more or less) democratic regimes in Europe decreased

from 24 to 11 between 1920 and 1939, in only one case did a democratically elected fascist party abolish democracy. And even in that case, Weimar Germany, the Nazis were only able to achieve this with the tacit support of nominally democratic parties.

Just as the original crisis theory is based on the exceptional case of Weimar Germany, so the current accounts are mostly supported by reference to two specific but highly publicized cases: the FN in France and the CA in Greece. Having replaced her father, party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen resurrected the FN like a phoenix from the ashes. After years of electoral decline, she delivered the party's best ever results in the 2012 presidential election and the second best ever results in that year's parliamentary elections.

Even more shocking were the two Greek parliamentary elections in May and June 2012, which saw the entrance into the country's parliament of the neo-Nazi CA, a party that had been marginal until then. While many radical right parties had entered national legislatures since 1980, this was

the first time that an openly extreme right party was able to do so. For most observers, academic and nonacademic alike, these two cases are symptomatic of the rise of the far right in contemporary Europe, and are seen as

a predictable result of the Great Recession.

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NOT SO IMPRESSIVE

An overview of the recent electoral results of far right parties in EU member states shows a very different picture, however (see Figure 1). If we compare the pre-crisis (2004–7) with the crisis (2009–13) results in national parliamentary elections, the striking *lack* of electoral success stands out most. First of all, 10 of the 28 EU member states have no far right party to speak of. Interestingly, this includes four of the five "bailout countries" (Cyprus, Ireland, Portugal, Spain)—Greece being the only exception. Second, among the eighteen countries with (somewhat) relevant far right parties, the electoral results are evenly split: Nine such parties have seen an increase in electoral support between 2005 and 2013, and nine have not. Third, of the nine countries with rising far right support, only four saw more or less sizable increases exceeding 5 percent of the national vote. That is the same number of coun-

tries that saw a decrease of more than 5 percent (Belgium, Italy, Romania, and Slovakia).

The four EU countries that have experienced a substantial increase in far right electoral support are Austria (+8.9 percent), France (+9.1 percent), Hungary (+14.5 percent), and Latvia (+5.4 percent). (Greece comes close—with a gain of 4.7 percent, the far right almost doubled its support.) The two West European countries, France and Austria, have suffered rather moderate economic distress, unlike the two East European countries (Hungary and Latvia). And while there is no doubt that the parties have profited from political dissatisfaction related to the economic crisis, both the FN and the FPÖ are established populist radical right parties, which achieved similar electoral results well before the crisis started (in 1997 and 1999, respectively). This leaves Hungary and Latvia, two of the hardest-hit countries in the East, which as a region has not borne the brunt of the Great Recession.

The rise of Jobbik in Hungary has received plentiful academic and public attention, though it sometimes takes a backseat to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose nationalist conservative government has significantly limited space for political opposition. Jobbik garnered the biggest far right gains within the EU, winning a staggering 16.7 percent of the vote in its first elections in 2010, and replacing the marginal Hungarian Justice and Life Party as the country's premier far right party. Yet, although Hungary has been hit extremely hard by the economic crisis, and has been flirting with a bailout, the 2010 elections were not really fought over the Great Recession. Both Orbán's Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance and Jobbik profited from widespread political dissatisfaction, but the causes were only partly related to the economy.

The purest case of the economic crisis theory seems to be, oddly enough, the tiny and little noticed Baltic country of Latvia, which was particularly hard hit by the crisis. Indeed, the economist Paul Krugman referred to Latvia as “the new Argentina” in one of his *New York Times* blog posts. Following the Weimar scenario, the far right National Alliance (NA) not only significantly increased its representation in parliament between 2006 and 2011; it also became a junior coalition partner in the Latvian government. The puzzling aspect of this is that the NA's rise took place between 2010 and 2011, *after* the peak of the economic crisis in Latvia.

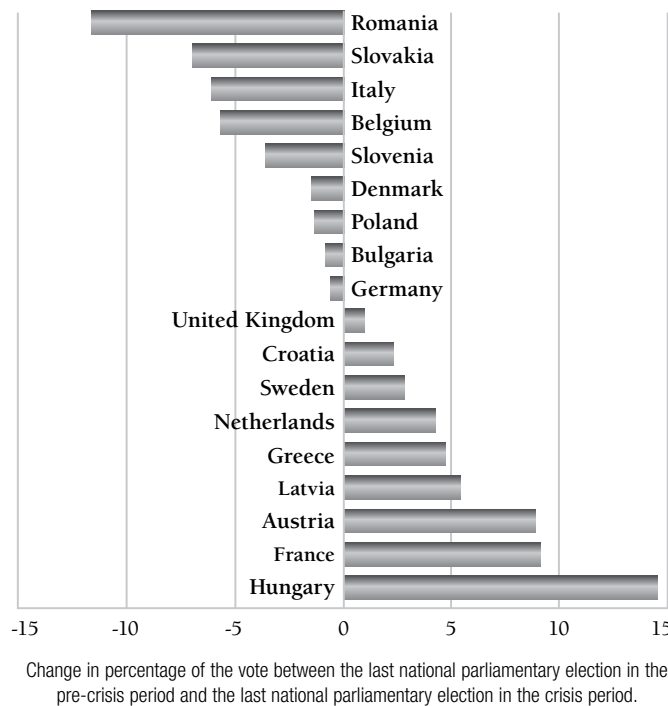
While the economy nosedived in 2008–9, it stabilized in 2010, and showed real GDP growth of 5.5 percent in 2011.

In short, the numbers do not add up. Despite all the talk of a far right resurgence as a consequence of the Great Recession, the sober fact is that only nine of the twenty-eight EU member states have seen any gain in support for far right parties, with substantial increases in a mere four countries. As in the case of the Great Depression, a handful of high-profile

cases (France and Greece today) obscure the fact that the vast majority of EU countries have had electorally and politically marginal far right parties both before and during the Great Recession. At the end of 2013, only twelve EU member states had far right parties in their national parliaments, and in only two were such parties in the national governments—in Latvia as a junior partner, and in Bulgaria as a supporting party of the minority government.

The fact is that, contrary to the received wisdom, European far right parties have mostly done well in affluent countries and regions during periods of economic growth and stability. As Ronald Inglehart argued in his 1977 book *The*

Figure 1—Change in Far Right Electoral Results Between Pre-Crisis (2004–7) and Crisis (2009–13)



Silent Revolution, it is under these conditions that sociocultural issues will trump socioeconomic issues for certain voter groups. Like the Greens on the left, the far right is mostly a post-materialist phenomenon. For some voters during periods of economic and political stability, fears about crime and immigration crowd out concerns over the economic situation, inflation, and unemployment, and their party preference changes from the mainstream to the far right.

ELECTION PROJECTIONS

There are three main reasons that commentators expect particularly striking results for far right parties in the May 2014 EP elections: (1) the economic crisis; (2) the second-order nature of European elections; and (3) the rise of Euroskepticism.

As the analysis above demonstrates, the crisis theory does not hold true, at least not for national parliamentary elections. However, political scientists argue that European elections are so-called second-order elections, which are characterized by lower overall turnout and higher scores for nonestablishment parties. While this is often interpreted to mean that protest parties, and the far right in particular, do very well in second-order elections, that is not fully correct. The *timing* of second-order elections, in relation to the first-order election cycle, has an important effect on voting patterns.

In general, established parties perform worst when second-order elections are held midterm between first-order elections, when citizens use their votes to send a protest signal to the national elites. However, protest parties tend to perform poorly when second-order elections are held shortly after first-order elections, when people mostly turn out to support their party. Given very different national election cycles, the effects can largely balance each other out at the EU level.

There is also a question as to whether European elections can still be considered second-order in 2014. The German political scientist Herman Schmitt observed even after the 2004 elections that “the second-order nature of EP elections is slowly heading toward a change,” and he expected this to continue, as a consequence of the EU’s growing visibility. The profound EU dimensions of the

Great Recession, most notably the highly unpopular bailouts, have sharply increased the union’s visibility, and have been the principal reason for a continent-wide rise of Euroskepticism. However, rising Euroskepticism is not only visible at the mass level. More and more outsider, and even insider, political parties are openly expressing soft and hard Euroskeptic critiques. Consequently, the far right has a growing group of national competitors for the (soft) Euroskeptic vote.

I have calculated the predicted numbers of seats for far right parties in the next EP on the basis of the most recent results in national parliamentary elections. (In all cases the last parliamentary election came during the economic crisis, and in most countries it was in the past two years.) While specific electoral systems differ by EU member state, almost all states (including France and the United Kingdom) use some form of proportional representation in European elections, often combined with an electoral threshold (of 4 or 5 percent normally). The number of contested seats ranges from 6 (for example, Luxembourg and Malta) to 97 (Germany). Consequently, in countries with fewer than 20 seats the European threshold is (much) higher than 5 percent, which means that fewer parties make it into the EP than into

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national parliaments.

Based on this analysis, far right parties from 12 of the 28 EU member states would make it into the EP. The far right would win a total of 34 seats, which is just 4.4 percent of all seats, and 3 seats less than they hold in the current European body. The situation would not change fundamentally if UKIP were included, since recent polls give the party roughly the same level of support (about 15–20 percent) as it actually achieved in the 2009 European elections. Even if we base our predictions not on national election results but on more favorable recent opinion polls, the results change little. With the FN at about 24 percent and the Dutch PVV at 15 percent, the total of far right seats would go up to 44, or 5.7 percent of all seats in the EP. This would be an increase of just 7 seats compared to 2009.

BARK AND BITE

This rather poor projected result is mostly a consequence of three factors. First, far right

parties are only relevant in roughly half of EU member states. As Table 1 shows, only 12 of the 28 states have a far right party in their national parliaments. Second, even in the countries where far right parties are relevant, they are generally a rather modest electoral factor. In the most recent national elections, far right parties topped 10 percent of the vote in just six of the twenty-eight member states, and surpassed 20 percent in only one (Austria). Third, of the six countries with a far right party over 10 percent, only one (France) is a large EU state with many EP seats.

Finally, it is important to note that even if far right parties do gain 44 seats, this does not mean that there will be a 44-seat-strong far right parliamentary group in the next EP. Recent agreements concerning electoral and political collaboration between Marine Le Pen (FN) and Geert Wilders (PVV) practically guarantee that the far right will be able to form an officially recognized group in the next EP, possibly under the banner of the European Alliance for Freedom, as this requires just 25 members from at least seven states. However, as in the past, this group will be strongly dominated by the FN, which will probably provide about 20 of the required minimum 25 seats.

History has shown that far right parties seldom work effectively together within the European arena, and that the FN's leading role has often been both crucial and highly divisive. Over the various legislative periods the far right has had either no official group in the EP or a group that fell apart amid (often petty) internal strife. In all cases the far right has been divided among different parliamentary groups, while various far right members of the EP have remained outside of any group. When it comes to their impact on the functioning of the EP, there is much bark but little bite. A recent report by the British think tank Counterpoint concluded that "the populist radical right focuses its role on gaining publicity rather

than participating in policy-making activities in the European Parliament."

RADICAL TIMING

The fact that the Great Recession has not led to a significant increase in far right support should not really come as a surprise. Economic crises have seldom led to far right electoral success in Europe: not the Great Depression of the 1930s, not the oil crisis of the 1970s, and not the transition from socialist dictatorship to capitalist democracy in Eastern Europe in the 1990s.

This is not to say that economic crises do not lead to political dissatisfaction or electoral defeats of governing parties. But in most cases protest is expressed in a variety of ways, from non-voting to voting for the establishment opposition or a plethora of old and new protest parties. This will undoubtedly also be the case in the upcoming European elections, in which the overall far right presence will probably only grow by around 10 seats or less (from 37 to 44) and the overall "anti-European populist" vote by some 30 seats (from 92 to 122), or roughly 15 percent of all EP seats.

The reason for the counterintuitive relationship between economic crises and far right voting was laid out, implicitly, in Inglehart's "post-materialism" thesis. During an economic crisis the political debate is dominated by socioeconomic issues, on which far right parties put little emphasis and have little credible expertise. Once the Great Recession finally ends and the economic situation has stabilized, many potential far right voters will return to prioritizing sociocultural issues relating to national identity and security. It is then that the dissatisfaction with national and European elites, which has grown to new dimensions during the Great Recession, could be most visible, on the far right and in other corners of antiestablishment protest. Whether that happens, however, depends at least as much on the actions of the mainstream parties as on the strategies of the far right. ■

From *Current History's* archives...

"But it would be unduly superficial to disregard the importance of the literature and the propagandized war views of the Neo-Fascists because of the structural weaknesses of their writings. The democracies have often ridiculously underestimated the irrational factor in history..."

John Lukacs "The Resurgent Fascists," April 1951

HISTORY IN THE MAKING
100
years
1914 - 2014