

Right-wing Populism in Germany too? A European Trend and its Special German Features

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The wave of right-wing populist electoral successes continues to sweep across Europe: Scandinavia is now completely riddled with parties of this type. Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, not to mention other countries, – all have successful right-wing populist parties. But there is one striking exception: present-day Germany has no successful right extremist party that fits the right-wing populist label. This may soon change, as may be seen from all current surveys and studies of attitude patterns in the population. Still, there is currently no formation in sight that one can imagine scoring successes like those of the Wilders party in the Netherlands or the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, although there are at least two groupings – the “Freedom” party and the “PRO-Germany” movement – that want to cash in on the successes of European right-wing populism. How is this German peculiarity to be explained, and what potentialities do we have here? These questions will be dealt with below, but first we will take a brief look at successful right-wing populism and the forms it takes.

Stylistic elements of right-wing populism

What is new about today's type of right-wing populist party is its political style. Although it draws on numerous ideological elements of the extreme right as far as issues are concerned, it avoids the stale antics of neo-fascist parties and disassociates itself from anything that smacks of glorification of Nazism. Above all, in the 1990s, some parties managed to incorporate popularised elements of neoliberalism into their platforms, thus making themselves respectable enough to enter into coalitions with conservative or liberal parties. The successful parties of the extreme and populist right also managed to pose as being aloof from the day-to-day business of politics, thus profiting from the widespread distrust of the mainstream parties. With the dawn of the 21st century and the return of social issues to the political arena, the ideological flexibility of these groupings became apparent. They proved themselves capable of including social issues in their policies – in some cases even without abandoning their neoliberal positions. This linking of heterogeneous, indeed mutually exclusive, positions was successful

owing to the racism peculiar to all these parties, which now appears mainly in the guise of anti-Islamism.

Populism as a concept is associated with the mass of the population, whose desires, yearnings and needs it claims to express. Populist arguments presuppose a friend-foe confrontation, enabling the various political problem areas to be divided up into good and bad, pro and contra. Populism is also characterised by a clear distinction between the “underdogs” – the ruled – and the “top dogs” – the rulers. This distinction makes it possible to see oneself as a mere object of politics and the populist party or movement as representing the interests of the little people against the “top dogs”.

A specific mixture of personalised and collectivist arguments is another characteristic of populism. Charismatic personalities and collective identities (nation, people, and “race”) complement one another here. Finally, populist agitation stirs up anxieties and irrational notions and is itself largely anti-intellectual. For right-wing populism these stylistic elements of political agitation have many uses. The friend-foe confrontation and the “us” and “them” confrontation can be used for quite different arguments. In traditional right-wing extremism we find sections of the population being included and excluded according to racist criteria. The homogeneous, racially/ethnically defined nation is distinguished from those who do not belong, the foreigners, aliens and others. This traditional racist argument can be supplemented by an argument that places more emphasis on the neoliberal performance criterion by denouncing the “spongers”, “slackers” and outsiders of society, who are identified as not belonging. Both arguments are to be heard in all right-wing populist parties.

Germany – a special case?

At present the most successful party of the extreme right in Germany is still the NPD – an anti-system, fascist-leaning party of the “old” right oriented to the Nazi model. However, one may venture the theory that this type of party will not have any real power option for the foreseeable future. The only option of the extreme right is to seize on right-wing populist developments and convert the existing potential into votes for its own political programme. The “German Conditions” series of analyses by Heitmeyer and others issued over the past nine years, the studies by Decker/Brähler on extreme rightist attitude patterns among the German population, and the latest Forsa survey commissioned by the weekly Freitag, repeatedly confirm the existence of such a potential. Those dissatisfied with the actual

figures could see from the Sarrazin debate how key topoi of right-wing populism seem to be endemic in Germany as well.

The Sarrazin debate involves all the substantive and formal elements of successful right-wing populism: a manifest ideology of inequality and exclusion, which is directed as much against ethnically and biologically defined minorities, as against those who fail to live up to the demands of capitalist society; the demand for a consistent policy of preventing any further immigration of people who are defined as culturally alien regardless of their attested rights; an aggressive attitude to people from Islamic countries; the arousing and intensifying of resentments against certain sections of the population who are held responsible for existing social crises; and, finally, a general rejection of mainstream politics combined with the adoption of an outsider stance.

What is both remarkable and unsettling about the Sarrazin debate is that it also finds a strong positive echo among the political elites, thus reinforcing the latter's ideology of inequality and exclusion. Peter Sloterdijk's support for the "achievers" of society and Gunnar Heinsohn's diagnoses of the reproduction of poverty as a result of the above-average reproduction of the poorer strata of the population – against which decisive action is required – fit in very closely with the theses popularised by Sarrazin. That such a mixture, especially in view of the success of Sarrazin's book, is not without a positive echo in the political class, is clear. Whereas the biologist racism ("Jewish gene", etc.) used by Sarrazin originally caused numerous politicians to keep their distance, this was followed by a second wave of "Yes, but" reactions, claiming that at least Sarrazin's diagnosis was correct, and that political action against further immigration by certain groups (i.e. Muslims) was necessary.

With breathtaking speed the laboriously achieved consensus that Germany is a country of immigration was cancelled (Seehofer); the multicultural society was declared a failure (Merkel); stricter sanctions against those supposed (without evidence) to be "integration-shy" were demanded (Gabriel); and blatant assertions of an anti-German racism on the part of immigrants were made (Kristina Schröder). This kind of debate can only strengthen prejudices, the urge to exclude, and the stigmatisation of certain sections of the population, thus confirming the theses of right-wing populism.

The Forsa survey published in the weekly Freitag (May 13, 2011) showing the degree of agreement or disagreement with key propositions of right-wing populism is further proof that such debates

have the effect of influencing and determining moods: 38% of respondents agreed completely or partially with the proposition “Islam is incompatible with our Western way of life and a threat to our values”, while 49% shared completely or partially the view that “immigration to Germany should be drastically reduced”. On the EU issue, the second main vote-winning issue – after anti-Islamism – for right-wing populism, as many as 70% agreed wholly or partially with the view that “All things considered, Germany gives too much money to Europe”, while 30% shared wholly or partially the view that “We need an independent Germany without the euro and without any political interference from the European Union”.

If one looks at a breakdown of the results by respondents’ party preference, it becomes clear that an above-average proportion of Die LINKE voters agree with these propositions. This indicates the heterogeneous social base for right-wing populist attitudes. Whereas the real losers of globalisation are responsive to racist and nationalist slogans, it is the middle classes potentially threatened by decline who swell the ranks of right-wing populism in many European countries. Sociologists call this “subjective deprivation”. In the 2010 regional elections in Italy the Northern League achieved a breakthrough into the working-class strongholds of the north, while in Austria the FPÖ became the most working-class party as long ago as 1999 – both serious alarm signals for the left. Surveys of views on topical issues show that Germany has just as great a potential for right-wing attitudes as many other European countries. What is missing here, however, is a successful party project to turn these attitudes into election successes.

Right-wing populist party projects in Germany

In Germany there are two groupings currently trying to benefit from the successes of European right-wing populism: the “PRO Germany” movement, with its numerous regional offshoots, and the “Freedom” Party founded by the former Berlin CDU deputy René Stadtkewitz. Whereas the “PRO” movement, on the basis of its history and cadres, clearly originates from the extreme right spectrum, “Freedom” belongs more on the right fringe of the CDU. Stadtkewitz left the CDU after his highly controversial invitation of the Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders to Berlin. For both parties anti-Muslim racism is the big issue, and in this case the Sarrazin debate was undoubtedly a clear confirmation of this orientation, although neither grouping has been able to make much political capital out of it so far. By the time of the Berlin elections of September 2011 we shall see whether one of the two groupings has the makings of a serious player on the right-wing

spectrum. So far, despite the above-mentioned agreement on right-wing issues, it does not seem likely, which is probably due to the absence of political leadership figures among right-wing populists in Germany (editors note: in these elections, the NPD received 2.1% of the vote, and the Pro-Deutschland 1.2% with Freedom at 1.0%).

Wilders, Bossi, Le Pen, Haider – for most right-wing populist parties that have been successful – at least for the adherents – one can point to a charismatic leadership figure who brings together the various heterogeneous wings and gives the party a face and a voice. In Germany there is no such figure anywhere on the extreme right. For this reason the speculations on the success of right-wing populism in Germany are associated with such names as Thilo Sarrazin, Friedrich Merz, Roland Koch, or even Eva Hermann. In Germany a political leadership figure who cannot be linked to attempts to relativise Nazism or any kind of anti-Semitism is a key requirement for a successful right-wing project. It is still the memory of the Nazi past that stands like an insurmountable barrier in the way of any grouping that can be shown to be ambiguous about Nazism, not to mention glorifying it. More than in other European countries, the Nazi past in Germany still prevents electoral successes of the extreme right. For this reason, which to a lesser extent also applies to other European countries, the populist right strives to maintain a clear distance from all neo-Nazi groupings. For some of these parties a demonstrative siding with Israel supplements their anti-Muslim racism, finding expression in December 2010 in a so-called “Jerusalem Declaration”, which was signed by representatives of the FPÖ, the Vlaams Belang, the Sweden Democrats and the German “Freedom” party during a joint visit to Israel.

Apart from the Nazi past and the traditional fragmentation of Germany’s extreme right, the formal requirements for a new party project in Germany are also complicated. The law not only requires a centralised federal party structure, but organisations in all federal states. The Schill party, so successful in Hamburg, instantly foundered in its attempt at such an expansion, and whether the Cologne or North-Rhine Westphalia PRO movement will do any better is highly dubious. On the other hand, we must still assume that at least one hypothetical spectacular success for a right-wing populist grouping in the foreseeable future could trigger a dynamic that would pave the way for such a party even in Germany. The question remains – what can and must the left do to prevent such a success?

The task for the left

If we take another look at the Forsa survey published in Freitag and the approval ratings for the statements made there among adherents of Die LINKE, it becomes clear that left voters not only show above-average approval ratings, but also have the highest ratings when it comes to the demand for a reduction in immigration (61%) and disillusion with the EU (57%). The studies by Decker/Brähler have come to the same conclusion. If one also looks at the social composition of the voters of some right-wing populist parties in Europe, one might easily conclude that Die LINKE could find itself competing directly with successful right-wing populism for parts of its voter base. This makes it all the more important that Die LINKE, to which some voters still ascribe the same political outsider status that right-wing populism claims for itself, should formulate clear positions regarding the key issues of anti-Islamism and EU hostility. More effort must be put into presenting the immigration issue as an issue of democracy and social participation in order to do something to counteract the fatal competition between underdogs. And the criticism of an EU that mainly bows to the interests of capital, must be made from a European perspective, without giving up the European and hence the supranational idea. The prevention of successful right-wing populism in Germany is a task for the left.