

Right-Wing Populism in Europe

By: Walter Baier

In many discussions the increase of extreme right-wing and right-wing populist parties in a growing number of European countries is regarded as if it were only a matter of parallel individual national phenomena. But there is also a European dimension that is unfortunately rarely considered, one that concerns all parts of Europe including the centre, the east and the north.

In the period between June 2009 and March 2011, right-wing parties obtained 155 of 3,066 seats in 13 parliaments, which means approximately 5 % of total representation, leading to the entry and or reinforcement of nationalist and right-wing populist or extreme right-wing parties in national parliaments, for example, ATKAKA in Bulgaria, Jobbik in Hungary and LAOS in Greece. This trend was also expressed by a strengthening of right-wing populist, Euro-sceptical parties in the European Parliament elections in 2010 and continued with elections in the Netherlands and in Finland.

Even though national specifics are relevant to understand the phenomena, these developments may indicate a profound change in the political geography of Europe as an entity.

At first sight, the extreme right-wing and populist party spectrum in Europe seems still to be fragmented. Yet the overlaps that can be seen demonstrate that a process of formation is underway, i.e. between the party grouping in the European Parliament: on the one side the “Europe of Freedom and Democracy“ (27 MEPs) founded in 2009, whose member parties include, among others, the “United Kingdom Independence Party”, the “The True Finns”, the Lega Nord (Italy) and the Greek LAOS; and on the other side the “European Alliance for Freedom”, founded in 2010 by members of the Austrian FPÖ, the German “Citizen in Rage”, the Hungarian Jobbik, the Sweden Democrats, and here too “The True Finns” and the “United Kingdom Independence Party”.

In addition, a double strategy can be discerned. While the EP grouping has attempted – through a careful selection of its member parties (for example, they refused the FPÖ) and a generally more moderate appearance – to show itself to be capable of alliances when confronted with the traditional and conservative right, the

composition of the Europe Party openly exhibits a still existing closeness to right-wing extremism.

In this the Austrian FPÖ plays a special role, with recent election successes proving that close relations to right extremism and neo-Nazism can be retained and does not necessarily contradict the developing of a modernised populist discourse.

However, visible proximity to traditional right extremism is not common for all the parties who are today making their mark on the right-wing margins of the political spectrum. While some of them are but transformations of, or splits from, parties of the rightist “mainstream“, another section represents veritable new foundations. That is why traditional anti-fascist rhetoric and forms of mobilisation, as necessary as they still are, are no match for today’s populist right challenge.

In the last issue of “transform!“, eight examples of extreme right and populist parties are examined. Phenomenologically speaking, four points of commonality appear:

A discourse whose centre is formed by the triade “security – immigration – unemployment“. All parties under scrutiny see immigrants as culprits for an allegedly growing process of criminality and unemployment. They call for a strong state with authoritarian traits and the closing of borders to impede further immigration.

Anti-Islam as well as the rejection of multiculturalism meanwhile constitute common points of reference between the populist right and the right-wing parties of the “mainstream“, as recently demonstrated by Mrs. Merkel’s public statement that “multiculturalism has failed“. In this way the ground is laid for broad legitimation of extremist right-wing movements. (Furthermore, the examples of renowned writers such as Peter Sloterdijk or Alice Schwarzer show that this development radiates widely, even into liberal intellectual circles.)

Most interestingly, in the course of the capitalist crisis all parties under consideration have replaced or at least amended their hitherto neoliberal discourse, primarily directed at sectors of the middle-class, with a statist and nationalist, protectionist agenda. With their appeal to the social fears of large parts of the populations individual parties were successful in intersecting a broad popular electorate and gaining up to 20 and 25%, in some cases even 30%, of the popular vote. It is in these cases that we can truly speak of a “populist” right wing.

With such voting results, these parties not only force their agenda onto other political parties, including the social-democratic parties, but also conquer key positions in terms of government formation.

Right-wing electorates that remain fairly stable over 20 % as well as the big abstention rates in a number of countries indicate a decrease in the legitimation of the political systems and perhaps the upcoming political crisis of a number of states, for example those whose political systems are traditionally rigid, like Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium or Austria.

In this context “populism” in a scientific sense means to appeal to large sections of society in order to mobilise them against the existing system of power management. We ought to take this “anti-systemic”, populist appeal seriously.

As the example of the Austrian FPÖ, which after a six-year long government participation has been catapulted close to an abyss of total fragmentation, shows: As long as the goal of changing the hegemonic systems is not shared at least to some degree by parts of the ruling class it becomes difficult or even impossible for the right-wing parties to take institutional responsibility and hold on to their populist appeal. Some of them may then opt to stay in opposition, even when they are asked to join a government, as the True Finns did after their recent electoral success.

The question arises whether at a certain point in the course of capitalist crisis – whose systemic character becomes increasingly apparent – the desire for a fundamental change will arise within parts of the ruling class. Or to put it differently: Does the advance of populist right-wing movements as supported by parts of the mainstream media, besides expressing popular discontent and frustration, also indicate such a political desire, at least for parts of the ruling class – for example, the desire for a new post-neoliberal hegemonic project?

In this context, the crisis of the European integration process offers an ideal point of departure, as it results in the deterioration of the life conditions of millions of people and is accompanied by an increase of authoritarianism resulting from the crisis.

The populist right wing is quite clear regarding this, as their social, economic and political agenda nowadays converge on one point: a revival of nationalism and hostility to any European integration, the

“préférence nationale”, the “true nature of Finns”, “Grand Rumania”, or the call of “Hungary – or Austria – first”, etc.

Politically they connect social demands with the call for national protectionism as privileging their “own”, national economy, a reintroduction of border controls to prevent immigration, tolls for foreign trucks, taxes on foreign commodities, goods and services, limiting the access of foreign students to “our” universities stopping monetary transfers to the indebted states, not incidentally labelled PIGS, etc. These challenges – combined with promises to hold the crisis at bay in one’s own country – can be found in the programmes of all parties considered as well as in the European umbrella organisations. The empirical evidence shows that the populist right has nowadays become a nationalist right.

We should be clear: The austerity programs of the EU and the IMF and the way in which they are implemented negate the democratic rights achieved in the nation-states and the national dignity of the concerned countries, which the left cannot accept. However, the nationalist interpretation, rather than a social and economic analysis, leads into a double trap.

It would not only strengthen the populist right but also support the strongest strain of nationalism in Europe which – as we can read in German magazines and hear at symposia – calls for a new arrangement within European relations, for example, by splitting the Euro zone into strong and weak regions.

Undoubtedly the question is complicated for the left. It must oppose the austerity policies of governments, the IMF and European institutions at the same time as it opposes the populisms which try to exploit them to foment of nationalisms. This, in my opinion, requires a firm and “class-politically” grounded independent stance advocating that the defence and extension of the social welfare state in Europe demands European and solidaristic solutions, which in turn require a profound change not only of state policies but also of the European Union.

Paper given at the Study Meeting of the Joint Social Conference (<http://www.jointsocialconference.eu/?lang=en>) on democratic solutions to the crisis of state debts (London, September 30, 2011).

The Joint Social Conference is a network of trade-unionists and representatives of the social movements with the aim of developing common European demands and strategies regarding the crisis. The European Trade-Union Confederation is among the supporting organisations.

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