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No one-trick ponies: the multifaceted appeal of the populist radical right

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No One-Trick Ponies: The Multifaceted Appeal of the Populist Radical Right

Stijn van Kessel

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The present environment for populist radical right (PRR) parties in Europe is favorable.¹ Both the refugee crisis as well as the recent terrorist attacks across Europe and beyond have ostensibly further fuelled xenophobic and anti-Islam sentiments among European publics; it has been on this basis that PRR parties have arguably built their support. Recent elections in Europe have indeed seen gains for parties with an outspoken xenophobic message: the victories in March 2016 for the “Alternative for Germany” (AfD, or *Alternative für Deutschland* in German) in the German regional elections and two far right parties (SNS and L'SNS) in the Slovak national elections being cases in point. Moreover, opinion polls in countries such as France, Austria and the Netherlands equally show promise for PRR parties. Though not all European countries have witnessed the successful mobilization of the PRR, it is fair to conclude that this family of parties is fairing very well. Nevertheless, it would be too premature to conclude that PRR parties have only thrived on the recent salience of the immigration issue.

The PRR's cultural agenda

Immigration certainly entails an important issue for PRR parties, which, according to Cas Mudde, share an ideological core of nativism, authoritarianism and populism.² Besides its belief in a strictly ordered society with clear norms and lines of authority, and its populist anti-establishment criticism – which puts forth a positive valorization of the (ordinary) people and a negative portrayal of the “elites” – the PRR's most defining characteristic is nativism. Mudde defines this concept as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state”.³ Nativism naturally correlates with hostility towards immigrants, who are inherently non-natives. While anti-immigration rhetoric was mainly voiced by PRR parties in the western part of the continent in the past, the recent refugee crisis has also made immigration a more

significant issue in Central and Eastern European countries. Previously, relatively few (non-Western) immigrants chose to settle in post-communist countries, and PRR parties in this part of Europe mainly targeted minority populations, such as the Roma. More recently, however, immigration has become an electoral issue in the post-communist context – with hostile language not only being voiced by the PRR, but also by dominant ‘mainstream’ party figureheads, such as Jarosław Kaczyński⁴ in Poland, Prime Ministers Victor Orban⁵ in Hungary and Robert Fico⁶ in Slovakia.

The “supply” of anti-immigration positions among political actors is meeting “demand” from citizens across Europe. Public opposition to immigration and related anxieties about the decay of national culture – not least due to the alleged “Islamization” of European societies – form the basis of PRR party support. Scholarly contributions have shown that PRR supporters are primarily motivated by the stances parties take on “cultural” issues, not least immigration and multiculturalism.⁷ Socio-economic issues such as welfare redistribution and market regulation, it has been argued, are secondary concerns on PRR party programs, as they are to their voters. What is more, PRR parties ostensibly have little to gain from placing more emphasis on socio-economic issues, as their electorates typically constitute a coalition between less-educated “blue-collar” workers and petit bourgeois entrepreneurs, two groups with contrasting economic interests and attitudes.⁸ As such, analysts have suggested that it is sensible for these parties to devote little attention to, and even “blur” their positions on, socio-economic matters.⁹

Beyond immigration: Europe and welfare

It would be inaccurate, however, to portray PRR parties as single-issue “anti-immigration” parties. For one, most are also characterized by their opposition to European integration. This position is also related to the PRR’s nativism: European integration is associated with a loss of national identity and sovereignty. The EU is generally portrayed as an undemocratic “super state” that threatens the native community and facilitates unwanted immigration.¹⁰ In addition, the PRR formulates its populist arguments against the EU: European integration is considered an elitist project with little regard for the “popular will”, while the EU’s decision-making procedures are complex and opaque.¹¹ The recent Eurocrisis has provided PRR parties with further ammunition against “Europe”. For instance, various PRR parties in Northern Europe, such as the AfD, the True Finns (PS) and the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), have voiced opposition to the bailouts for troubled Eurozone members and the pooling of more

sovereignty at the European level as a response to the crisis. While Euroscepticism is not the exclusive prerogative of the PRR party family – the radical left, for one, laments the EU’s neoliberal character – and though degrees of opposition vary across individual cases, the anti-EU position is a defining characteristic of contemporary PRR parties.¹²

Further, even though the prevailing consensus states that PRR parties are mainly characterized by their cultural agenda, there is an increasing body of scholarly research showing that (Western European) PRR parties are converging around what has been called a “welfare chauvinist” position.¹³ This essentially entails support of economic redistribution and the preservation of welfare state entitlements, whereby the non-natives (most notably: immigrants) are excluded from receiving welfare or have only limited access to it. This implies that the PRR is not necessarily “right-wing” in terms of socio-economic issues; indeed, PRR parties may support traditionally “leftist” causes such as safeguarding pensions and workers’ rights. PRR parties’ conception of welfare is, however, hardly universal and the exclusion from welfare of non-natives – who are often portrayed as underserving scroungers – is typically argued to be a precondition for the survival of the welfare state.

The identification of welfare chauvinist appeals among PRR parties represents a departure from a few influential scholarly accounts from the 1990s. Notably, Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony McGann initially spoke of an ideological “winning formula” for the radical right in Western Europe, which entailed a combination of neo-liberalism with authoritarianism and xenophobia.¹⁴ It is still something of a moot point whether such early accounts were off the mark as far as the socio-economic program of the radical right is concerned, or whether the adoption of more “leftist” welfare protection positions by PRR parties is a relatively recent trend. For at least a number of cases, such as the French Front National, the latter interpretation appears valid.¹⁵ It is, in any case, worth noting that this debate primarily centers on the Western part of the continent, as many PRR parties in post-communist countries were geared towards defending the social rights of the “transition losers” from the outset: citizens who did not benefit from the transition to the free-market economy.¹⁶

Where culture meets economy

Whether taken as a new phenomenon or not, does the welfare chauvinist appeal of the PRR signify that the socio-economic agenda of this family of parties is (becoming) more relevant than previously assumed? On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the economic and welfare policies promoted by the PRR are primarily informed by their cultural agenda.

Ostensibly, the most important aim for these parties is to protect the natives, and the economic policies they advocate can also be seen in this light. On the other hand, however, it seems that current scholarship is too preoccupied with the analytical distinction between cultural and economic dimensions of political competition. It is difficult, and arguably misguided, to interpret the welfare chauvinism of the PRR in *either* economic *or* cultural terms; economic interest and identity are not as easily distinguishable as scholars often suggest. The desired exclusion of immigrants from entitlements may be based on identity, but welfare redistribution inherently remains an economic issue as well. In the same way, it would be too simplistic to attribute the success of PRR parties only to fear among their electorates about the loss of culture and identity, or anxieties about Islamic extremism. Citizens do not necessarily perceive cultural and material threats as clearly distinct from one another, and resistance to immigration is partly borne out of fears of economic competition and welfare deprivation. In fact, the “exclusive solidarity” agenda¹⁷ promoted by the PRR is likely to be electorally potent precisely because it taps into an amalgamation of cultural and economic concerns found among a significant share of the electorate.

Conclusion

In light of current events, it is clear that immigration is now primarily framed as a cultural and security issue. This no doubt plays into the hands of the PRR, as this is how such parties prefer to address the topic. This does not mean, however, that support for PRR parties will automatically drop when the salience of other issues rises, or when immigration is associated more with economic bread-and-butter issues. Ultimately, the PRR’s agenda is about more than cultural anxieties alone.

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¹ The author would like to thank Koen Abts and Emmanuel Dalle Mulle for their useful feedback; some ideas conveyed in this chapter are the borne out of a joint research project on the socio-economic agenda of the populist radical right.

² Cas Mudde (2007): *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22

⁴ Reuters (2015): Polish Opposition Warns Refugees Could Spread Infectious Diseases, October 15, (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-poland-idUSKCN0S918B20151015>), accessed June 22, 2016.

⁵ Georgi Gotev (2015): Orbán Slams EU Migration Policies Ahead of Juncker’s Mini-Summit,

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Euractiv, October 22, (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/orban-slams-eu-migration-policies-ahead-of-juncker-s-mini-summit/>), accessed June 22, 2016.

⁶ Euractiv (2016): Fico: EU's Migration Policy Is 'Ritual Suicide', January 26, (<http://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/fico-eu-s-migration-policy-is-ritual-suicide/>), accessed June 22, 2016.

⁷ See e.g. Elisabeth Ivarsflaten (2008): What Unites the Populist Right in Western Europe? Reexamining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases. In: *Comparative Political Studies*, 41/1, pp. 3–23; Daniel Oesch (2008): Explaining Workers' Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway and Switzerland. In: *International Political Science Review*, 29/3, pp. 349–373.

⁸ Elisabeth Ivarsflaten (2005): The Vulnerable Populist Right Parties: No Economic Realignment Fuelling Their Electoral Success. In: *European Journal of Political Research*, 44/3, pp. 465–492.

⁹ Jan Rovny (2013): Where Do Radical Right Parties Stand? Position Blurring in Multidimensional Competition. In: *European Political Science Review*, 5/1, pp. 1–26.

¹⁰ See e.g. Cas Mudde (2007) *op. cit.*; Liesbet Hooghe/Gary Marks/Carole Wilson (2002): Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?. In: *Comparative Political Studies*, 35/8, pp. 965–89; Catherine de Vries; Erica Edwards (2009): Taking Europe to Its Extremes: Extremist Parties and Public Euroscepticism. In: *Party Politics*, 15/1, pp. 5–28.

¹¹ Paul Taggart (2004): Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe. In: *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9/3, pp. 269–288; Stijn van Kessel (2015): *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹² See e.g. Margarita Gómez-Reino/Iván Llamazares (2013): The Populist Radical Right and European Integration: A Comparative Analysis of Party-Voter Links. In: *West European Politics*, 36/4, pp. 789–816.

¹³ Jørgen Andersen/Tor Bjørklund (1990): Structural Changes and New Cleavages: The Progress Parties in Denmark and Norway. In: *Acta Sociologica*, 33/2, pp. 195–217.

¹⁴ Herbert Kitschelt/Anthony McGann (1995): *The Radical Right in Western Europe*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; see also Hans-Georg Betz (1994): *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

¹⁵ Gilles Ivaldi (2015): Towards the Median Economic Crisis Voter? The New Leftist Economic Agenda of the Front National in France. In: *French Politics*, 13/4, pp. 346–369.

¹⁶ Andrea Pirro (2014): Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: The Different Context and Issues of the Prophets of the Patria. In: *Government and Opposition*, 49/4, pp. 600–629.

¹⁷ Zoe Lefkofridi/Elie Michel (2014): Exclusive Solidarity? Radical Right Parties and the Welfare State, EUI RSCAS Working Paper, EUI RSCAS 120.