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Why 2013 Is Not 1933: The Radical Right in Europe

DAVID ART

To many observers, Europe appears to be revisiting the 1930s. The sovereign debt crisis that exploded in 2009 and still threatens to destroy the euro has intensified the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression. Today, as in the 1930s, orthodox economic policies have exacerbated the misery for millions of people across the continent and left them both disillusioned and enraged with the politicians who ruined their prosperity. Today, as then, many citizens not only reject their political class but also embrace extremist ideas that explicitly invoke fascism. In this view, then, a massive economic crisis has once again generated extremist politics. And while long-standing democracies appear unlikely to collapse, or European states to go to war with one another, those who view the current situation through the lens of the 1930s worry nonetheless that the political backlash will undermine many of the achievements of the postwar European order. Norms of tolerance, the quality of liberal democracy, and European integration all seem to be at stake.

In challenging this common view, I do not mean to trivialize the phenomenon of contemporary right-wing extremism. The ranks of far right political parties include Holocaust deniers, as well as thugs who intimidate foreigners, antiracism activists, and politicians from other parties. There are neighborhoods in major cities and small towns across Europe in which it is not safe for ethnic minorities to live or travel. As a source of

criminality and domestic terrorism, right-wing extremism is a real problem that authorities across Europe must continue to monitor. Intelligence breakdowns in this area can have tragic consequences, as the July 2011 massacre committed by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway, and serial murders in the previous decade by a neo-Nazi cell in Germany, have demonstrated.

Yet for all the attention they receive in the press, far right parties do not have the political influence one might expect. One could be forgiven for believing that they were spontaneously generated by the current sovereign debt crisis, but they actually have been a feature of the party landscape in many European states since the late 1980s. During this period, some of them have attracted vote shares of close to 25 percent of the electorate, and some have been part of national governing coalitions. One may disagree with the platforms of these parties—which are alternatively referred to as far right, radical right, extreme right, and right-wing populist—but it is impossible to claim that the parties have undermined democracy to a measurable extent anywhere.

More often than not, radical right parties (this is the term I choose to use) have been more consumed with keeping their various factions together and trying to appear politically competent than with designing xenophobic or otherwise exclusionary policies. And while these parties in some small countries have threatened to stymie any further attempts at European integration—the True Finns in Finland and Golden Dawn in Greece would be the primary examples—it is important to note that they either are marginal players or have been effectively marginalized in the five biggest European Union member states:

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France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

THE FAR RIGHT'S TWO FACES

Both the scholars who study the far right and the state authorities who monitor it usually make a distinction between radical right (or right-wing populist) and right-wing extremist political actors. This may seem like semantic hair-splitting, since the adjectives “radical” and “extremist” are often used synonymously, but the differences are in fact critical.

One can define radical right parties as those that view ethnic differences as basic, immutable, and potentially destructive features of political life, and that take positions on related issues that place them to the right of their mainstream conservative competitors. This concern with the cultural dimension of politics has led radical right parties in Western Europe to adopt positions on immigration that are stricter than those of any other political parties in their respective countries. It is worth noting that the cultural cleavage in West European politics is primarily manifested in questions relating to national identity, as opposed to the United States where issues like abortion, gay rights, and gun control are particularly salient and divisive.

Radical right parties are thus reacting to the general political environment in their respective countries when they try to tap into a pool of voters who harbor strong suspicions of, or outright hostility toward, both those foreigners already living inside the country and those who could potentially join them. Radical right parties seek to win votes on other issues beside immigration, but as a rule most of their support comes from people who would define themselves as nationalistic and who consider immigration to be threatening. These parties are committed to the democratic rules of the game, and reject the paramilitarism that characterized the fascist parties of the twentieth century's interwar period. They do not make claims about the superiority of one ethnic group over another, but argue that each ethnicity should have its own political entity and that a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity inevitably leads to political and social problems.

Right-wing extremist parties and organizations differ in three crucial respects. First, they reject existing political institutions and seek to replace

liberal democracy with a different (and usually authoritarian) type of political order. Second, they often engage in or condone violence to serve political ends. Third, whereas leaders of radical right parties are normally careful to reject the anti-Semitism and biological racism of the Nazis, and generally distance themselves from fascist parties of the interwar period, right-wing extremists openly embrace this heritage.

In electoral terms, there is no question which of the two faces of the far right has been more successful. The list of radical right parties that have captured upwards of 10 percent of the vote is long: Some notable examples are the Austrian Freedom Party, the Danish People's Party, the French National Front, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, the Northern League in Italy, and the Swiss People's Party. With the exception of the French National Front, these parties either have all been part of national coalition governments or, by agreeing to support coalition governments in which they were not officially included, have had a measure of political influence at the national level.

Right-wing extremist parties by and large have been electoral failures, normally capturing a couple of percentage points at best in national elections.

The boundaries between the radical right and the extreme right are certainly more blurred

in the real world of politics than in the academic domain of political science. What is one to make of a party like Jobbik in Hungary, which is led by respectable-looking university graduates but whose rank and file wear military garb and venerate their country's fascist past? Most radical right parties have had some overlap in both membership and ideology with extremist organizations, and pointing out the unsavory backgrounds of radical right politicians has been a central occupation of antiracist watchdog groups and journalists alike. Nevertheless, to a striking degree, most radical right parties have tried to sever links with extremist groups and fascist imagery: Jobbik is exceptional both in the sense that it has adopted the opposite strategy, and in that it has managed to win elections while doing so.

In most European countries, unfiltered racism and fascist nostalgia are hardly vote-winners. To be attractive to that sizable percentage of the electorate for which immigration is a chief concern, radical right parties need to present themselves

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as representing the common-sense views of the “silent majority” rather than those of the fanatical fringe.

INEPT AND DIVIDED

Most of the radical right parties active today in Europe have been around for several decades, and the reasons for their emergence thus predate the sovereign debt crisis. Certainly the single most important factor in their rise has been the transformation of most European states from homogenous societies into heterogeneous ones. Up until the 1960s, Sweden was almost entirely Swedish: Now it has a foreign population of nearly 20 percent. Demographic patterns in most other European countries have been similar, and have turned immigration into a political issue. But there are other factors at play.

Globalization and European integration also have produced nationalist backlashes that radical right parties are best positioned to exploit. As in the United States, trust in politics has gradually declined since the 1960s, and with it support for established political parties. The media have also contributed to a “personalization of politics” that favors charismatic outsiders over the stodgy party leaders of the past. The particular issues may be somewhat different, but the texture of right-wing populism in Europe is not all that different from that in the United States. Indeed, if the United States elected its politicians through proportional representation, it is difficult to imagine that it would not have a political party that looked very similar to radical right parties in Europe. Who would bet against a party led by radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, or perhaps former Alaska governor Sarah Palin, getting at least 5 percent of the national vote?

In general, we can say that the radical right has been far more effective in criticizing the political system than in changing it. Simply put, many radical right parties have proved to be incompetent. They often have a great deal of trouble finding credible candidates for public office. They are often reliant on people with no political experience, and with no interest in learning the finer points of parliamentary procedure. It is thus not surprising that many radical right parties have collapsed under the pressure of holding public office.

Many radical right parties are organizational basket cases in which bitter internal fights produce constant defections and breakaway parties.

To those who have observed these parties closely over the years, it often seems as if factions within the parties are more hostile toward one another than they are toward the mainstream parties they routinely denounce. What all this means is that radical right parties are often much weaker than their electoral tallies might indicate. The history of the European radical right is littered with examples like the List Pim Fortuyn, a Dutch party that won 17 percent of the vote in 2002 and entered into a coalition government, but whose serial incompetence and factionalism led to its implosion after less than nine months in office.

LITTLE CLOUT

To be sure, a number of radical right parties have built strong party organizations, found competent leaders, won significant vote totals, formed coalition governments with other parties, and helped make policy. In some cases they have made immigration policy slightly more restrictive. Aside from this, however, scholars have found little evidence that radical right parties have followed through on most of the hot-button positions they espouse when they are running for office. This should come as no surprise, since these parties have been junior members of coalition governments, and because policy making in coalition governments normally requires a high degree of compromise.

This does not mean that radical right parties have always entered into government without causing protest. In 2000, the radical right Austrian Freedom Party formed a coalition government with the conservative Austrian People's Party. The leader of the Freedom Party—the late Jörg Haider—had attracted international attention for controversial statements about the Nazi era. This put the 14 other EU member states at the time in a difficult position. They decided to impose diplomatic sanctions on Austria, which they lifted only after a special fact-finding committee reported that the Austrian government was not undermining democracy or minority rights. Since then, radical right parties have become part of coalition governments elsewhere in Europe without much commotion.

Given the implications for European integration, however, it is important to note in which countries radical right parties have *not* joined governing coalitions. Although it is not politically correct to say so, some states in the EU are more

important than others. France and Germany have historically been the “motors” of European integration: The bargains they have struck between themselves have been reflected in the series of treaties that have shaped the union, from the Treaty of Rome in 1957 to the Lisbon Treaty of 2007. Italy has been less influential, but its status as an original member and the size of its economy render it important nonetheless. The United Kingdom joined the union late (in 1973), and is better known for its skepticism toward the European project than for supporting it. Yet, since this skepticism can take constructive and destructive forms, Britain’s positions nearly always matter. Finally, though Spain only joined in 1986 after its transition to democracy was complete, it has been a crucial player in the ongoing sovereign debt crisis primarily because it, like Italy, has an economy that is deemed “too big to fail.”

GERMAN CONTRITION

Germany has often been criticized for not doing enough to solve the euro zone crisis, but imagine how different things would be if there were a politically powerful radical right party to further constrain Chancellor Angela Merkel’s room for maneuver. Germany is one of the few states in Europe in which a radical right party has never won parliamentary representation at the national level. Several parties have attempted to parlay breakthroughs in state elections into seats in the Bundestag (the German parliament), but none has succeeded.

As one might expect, the primary reason for the weakness of radical right parties in postwar Germany is the legacy of the Nazi past. Beginning in the 1960s, an intense society-wide process of critically examining Nazism and its crimes created a “culture of contrition” that centers on Holocaust remembrance. The visible signs of this culture are difficult to miss in Berlin: The Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe is strategically placed in the heart of the city, directly adjacent to both the Bundestag and the Brandenburg Gate. Other Holocaust remembrance sites in the German capital alone include the House of the Wannsee Conference (where the Final Solution was planned), the Topography of Terror (the site of the former Gestapo headquarters), and the Jewish Museum Berlin, which traces the history

of German-Jewish relations. It is fair to say that no other society has made remembrance of its past crimes such an integral part of its national identity.

The cultural salience of the Nazi past raises difficult issues for radical right parties in Germany. For one, it is nearly impossible for them to discuss their signature issue—resistance to immigration—without being labeled Nazis by the press and by other political parties. This dynamic makes them attractive to the small number of Germans who glorify, rather than condemn, the Nazi past, but the presence of such extremists further discredits these parties in the eyes of the electorate.

Politicians from across the spectrum routinely denounce the radical right as a danger to German democracy. There is no hope of its leaders forming coalitions or cooperative arrangements with other political forces, as they have been able to do in other European countries. And as if these barriers were not high enough, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution—a division of the Interior Ministry—is tasked with monitoring political parties that constitute a potential threat to German democracy. Surveillance and infiltration have further weakened the organizational strength of the radical right.

Thus, while German politicians never tire of reminding their fellow citizens of the lessons of the Nazi past and the dangers of right-wing extremism, the idea that a radical right party could gain parliamentary representation in Germany—much less become a party of government—is far-fetched.

RULES OF THE GAME

So too is the idea of a meaningful far right presence in the French National Assembly, despite the fact that the National Front is probably the best-known radical right party in Europe and has served as a model for similar parties across the continent. National Front party leader Marine Le Pen’s 17.9 percent of the vote in the first round of the 2012 French presidential election apparently stunned many observers, but was not surprising to those who have followed the Front over the years. Back in the 1988 presidential election, her father Jean-Marie Le Pen won nearly 15 percent of the vote, and in 2002 he truly shocked the political establishment by placing second in the first

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round and forcing a runoff between himself and Jacques Chirac, the incumbent president.

Yet, while the National Front has proved capable of capturing around 15 percent of the electorate for nearly a quarter of a century, France's electoral rules make it very difficult for it to translate its votes into seats. Most French elections consist of a first round, with multiple candidates, and a second round in which the top two contestants from the first round battle for a seat in the parliament (or for the presidency). So long as other French parties agree—as they have since the early 1990s—to prevent the National Front from winning seats in parliament, they can coordinate in either the first or second rounds to deny the radical right a majority in most cases, even in those constituencies in which it may be the strongest political force. As a case in point, the National Front won 13.6 percent of the vote in the first round of the 2012 parliamentary elections but captured only 2 out of 577 seats (0.3 percent) in the National Assembly.

There is a radical right party in Great Britain that used to go by a name similar to that of its French counterpart, and it has given the impression that its primary purpose is to make the French variant look successful by comparison. The high-water mark of the British National Party (BNP), formerly called simply the National Front, was in 2010 when it won 1.9 percent of the vote in national parliamentary elections. To be fair, it had performed significantly better in 2009 elections for the European Parliament, winning 6.3 percent of the vote nationally and two seats. But these elections were conducted under a system of proportional representation rather than the first-past-the-post system that Britain uses for national parliamentary elections. As in the United States, the virtual certainty that votes for small parties will be “wasted” convinces many potential radical right voters in Britain to either not vote at all or support the party of their second preference.

As in Germany, history also plays a role in keeping the radical right marginal in Great Britain. Both before and after the Second World War, the British far right looked to German Nazism for inspiration. The potential pool of radical right activists was therefore rendered rather small, since most would-be supporters did not want

to be identified as treasonous. In the 1970s, the National Front was primarily involved in street brawls fueled by massive alcohol consumption, and to a lesser extent in Holocaust denialism. The BNP has since tried to clean up its image, but this history—and the BNP's continuing appeal for all sorts of neo-Nazis and petty criminals—has prevented it from developing a respectable façade. The party gains a lot of press, but its influence on British politics is minimal.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATIONS

The far right in Spain is even less successful than it is in Great Britain. Since Spain's transition to democracy following the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975, no far right party has won more than 1 percent in national parliamentary elections. For several decades the lack of significant immigration to Spain helped explain why its radical right parties were unable to capitalize on their signature issue. Yet it is striking that, even as Spain has become a magnet for immigration over the past decade, the radical right has yet to make an electoral breakthrough. Part of this may have to do with the fact that the nationalist terrain that radical right parties normally occupy is already crowded by ethno-regionalist parties. Negative

associations with authoritarianism may also dampen the radical right's appeal. Whatever the reasons, there is little sign that the radical right in Spain looks set to profit from the economic crisis.

Of the five biggest states in the EU, only in Italy has the radical right held a meaningful degree of political power. Following a massive corruption scandal in the 1990s that wiped out the two largest Italian political parties, Silvio Berlusconi began his initial stint as prime minister in 1994. His first government lasted less than a year, but it was notable in that it included two parties from the far right: the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) and the radical right Northern League. Berlusconi would rule in coalition with both of these parties from 2001 to 2006 and again from 2008 to 2011.

The MSI initially maintained its connection to fascism, but over the course of the 1990s it shed this historical baggage and developed into a mainstream conservative party. The Northern

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League, which began as a regional autonomist party, moved in the other direction by adopting virulently anti-immigrant positions that won it an average of 10 percent of the vote nationally, and upwards of 25 percent in parts of the north. With the Northern League holding the portfolios of the interior ministry as well as the finance ministry in Berlusconi's governments, it arguably wielded more power than any other radical right party in Europe. However, Berlusconi's humiliating resignation in the face of EU pressure in late 2011 and another corruption scandal have recently decimated the Northern League's electoral support.

MARGINAL AT BEST

So where in Europe are radical right parties currently strong? Norway and Switzerland both have large right-wing parties that share similarities with radical right parties elsewhere, although members of these parties would deny this classification vociferously. Neither nation is an EU member. Several countries that are members of the EU but not of the euro zone have sizable radical right parties: Denmark, Hungary, and increasingly Sweden. They are marginal players in the current sovereign debt crisis, while perhaps relevant for the question of European integration.

Three members of the euro zone do have governments in which radical right parties have been, or currently are, represented: Finland, the Netherlands, and Austria. Since these countries are part of the dwindling group of euro zone countries with strong credit ratings, their voices are critical, and they might be thought to harbor the greatest potential for radical right parties to shape the outcome of the sovereign debt crisis. Yet the True Finns have not become the bailout blockers that many pundits predicted. Dutch voters in a 2012 general election backed away from both far right and far left parties that wanted to leave the euro, preferring the pro-bailout parties of the center. The Austrian Freedom Party claims

it will not pay another euro to support profligate states like Greece if it comes to power after this year's elections, but this is most likely an empty threat. While it is conceivable that a radical right party in a euro zone country could unravel the painfully negotiated bargains that are keeping the euro afloat, the fact that none has yet done so is telling.

When political parties that play on xenophobia emerged in the 1980s, many serious observers of European politics were puzzled by the fact that citizens of some of the most prosperous and longest-standing democracies in the world voted in droves for them. For many, the only conceivable explanation was that fascism had never been entirely extinguished, and that it was resurfacing in a somewhat different guise. Nearly 30 years later, a new generation of journalists, pundits, and even some academics is making a similar claim. But the current version of the argument is as flawed as the previous one.

One need not resort to (misplaced) historical analogies to explain why parties that play the racial card in multiethnic societies gain enough votes to win seats under electoral systems of proportional representation. Given the percentage of Europeans who identify themselves as very racist or somewhat racist—upwards of 50 percent, according to the most recent polling by Eurobarometer, the public opinion agency of the European Union—perhaps the more interesting question is why the radical right has not won more votes and exerted more political influence.

If Europe continues to pull itself back from the brink of financial calamity and political instability, historians will write books not about how the radical right destroyed the European project but how elected officials checked populist influences and found a way to muddle through. This would make for a more mundane and complicated story, but one that most Europeans—and indeed the rest of the world—should be rooting for. ■