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Europe

# Europe: A continent in crisis, a rising far right

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV429 - October 2010 -

Publication date: Tuesday 5 October 2010

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**Europe is in crisis, and we are living through one of the worst anti-social and anti-labour offensives of our recent history, a crisis that is being used as backdrop for the justification and implementation of a “maximalist” neoliberal agenda, delivered through the IMF and its structural adjustment plans. Attacks and adjustments which meet with timid responses from the left (apart from Greece), with the majority of political and social organizations proving stunned in a nightmare that seems to have no end view.**

What about the right? The crisis occurred at a time of retreat of the left virtually across the continent, with honourable exceptions, while at the same time, for two decades we have seen the emergence of neo-populist options of a totalitarian and xenophobic nature, starting with the emergence of the Front National (FN) in France in the European elections of 1983. Since then it has been confirmed that the case of the FN was not an exception but rather the model around which a new far right in Europe has been built. In the heat of the crisis, the far right is not only appearing “electorally” in new countries and parliaments but also growing and consolidating where it was already present

An overview of the far right and its latest results seems to indicate that it has been more able than other options to connect with the vote of protest against the crisis and the current model of construction of the EU. In the elections to the European Parliament it was the ideological spectrum which grew most, reaching 37 MEPs, and in various elections from 2009 onwards it has continued to grow: in the Hungarian elections the far right and anti-Semitic party Jobbik scored 17% of the votes; in France the Front National has managed to recover electorally, after the setback of the 2007 parliamentary elections (4.29%), scoring 11.6% in the latest regional elections; in Austria the FPÖ won 16% in the presidential elections, becoming the second biggest electoral force; the Northern League was the most popular party electorally in the north of Italy in the last regional and municipal elections, with 2.7 million votes; in the Netherlands, the Party of Freedom has consolidated its good electoral results in the European elections, reaching 17% of the vote in the parliamentary elections and increasing its parliamentary representation from 9 to 24 members, becoming the third force in Parliament; and in the last parliamentary elections the far right Vlaams Belang obtained 12.5% of the vote in Flanders.

Thus a review of recent election results cannot but bring us a strong feeling of anxiety, not only because they seem to mark a trend consolidated across much of Europe, capitalizing on an anti-establishment protest vote with processes of social, labour and economic insecurity, but also because this upward trend of the European far right is not countered socially and politically by the growth of political options of an anti-capitalist character. And the success of the extreme right is not restricted to elections; it is also capable of generating a structuring and unifying discourse capable of marking the “agenda” and permeating the discourse and policies of the big European conservative and social liberal formations. A process which in France was referred to as the “Lepenization of the spirit” which was defined by the academic Raimundo Viejo as “the capacity to permeate the discourse of the centre-right, if not the centre-left (...) the ability to counterpose an articulated discourse, a generator of feeling for its audiences” (Diagonal 105, June 25 to July 8, 2009).

These organizations, while maintaining significant differences, the product of their disparate political, social and economic contexts, also maintain common features that allow us to speak of a break with the classic paradigms of inter-war fascism and which constitute a totalitarian neopopulism of a xenophobic stripe, a 21st century far right. In the forty years that separated the defeat of fascism and the electoral emergence of the first formations of the new far right, there has been an important reformulation and reconstruction of a common identity adapted to new times and

with a structuring discourse which is an important axis of its electoral success. In these pages I will try to point out the key elements of this discourse.

# Immigration and xenophobia

One of the main defining features of the new far right is the exaltation of xenophobia, fear of the poor foreigner, of what is different. National-populism, a key element of the new configurations of the far right, has been described as a schematic and Manichaeian reading of reality, of easy circulation, which is dominated by the figure of one or more scapegoats, "anti-popular" agents deemed to be at the root of the ills suffered by the national community. While the old fascisms built a discourse based to a great extent on the exploitation of the scapegoat of the Jewish-Masonic and Communist conspiracies, the new far right organizations have built a new scapegoat for all the ills of our society, immigration.

The meeting between national populism and xenophobia has been transformed into a political recipe for success by virtue of a number of favourable conditions. The general increase in unemployment and the growth of immigration in Europe in the late 1970s and especially during the 1980s and 90s generated a climate conducive to the extension of the xenophobic discourse. Competition rather than cooperation between workers, native or foreign, for increasingly scarce resources (work, housing, social benefits and so on) in a climate of economic recession and dismantling of the so-called welfare state, favoured the right organizations, given the generalized crisis of the left, in submitting easy answers to complex problems. In this way the traditional foreign enemy, Communism, was supplanted by a new enemy, internal this time, immigration, which was much more socially and electorally profitable.

In this sense, immigrants, provided they are poor, are presented on the far right as the new enemy in Europe in the 21st century. Through the negation of the universal right of individuals to seek a worthwhile future, immigrants are represented as "parasites" coming to steal our wealth and take the meagre social benefits from a shrinking welfare state. The far-right populist form exploits the fear of the foreign and the different, exalting the alleged national primacy of the native against the foreign invasion. In this way far right organizations present themselves as the only ones who advocate and work for the interests of "national" citizens, while the rest of the parties favour immigrants. In this sense they orient to the motto of the FN at the presidential elections of 1992; "They prefer foreigners. We prefer the French. Vote French".

The big victory of the far right can be measured not only by the significant electoral returns that this policy has brought them, with access to the Italian, Austrian, Romanian, Polish and Swiss governments. But, above all, in that that they have managed to include immigration, citizenship and insecurity on the European political agenda as fundamental problems, beyond their electoral success in each country.

In this form, as the political scientist Piero Ignazi says, skilful exploitation of the immigration issue has allowed the "post-industrial" far right to reach a broad consensus among heterogeneous social sectors, addressing the population in terms of "values and identity, rather than economic or class interests". This strategy has enabled them to overcome social boundaries that hardly two decades ago seemed insurmountable and in recent years they have had success in permeating these ideas into the classical conservative parties, undergoing a process of adaptation to the xenophobic discourse. Meanwhile, the social democratic parties which have converted to social liberalism seem to have also caved in on this matter, applying regressive policies with regard to fundamental rights that only succeed in paving the way to the consolidation and expansion of far right political options.

# Islamophobia

There are also differences of accent in the xenophobic discourse against immigration. In fact it is producing a major outbreak of Islamophobia; and not all immigrants are hated "equally" by the extreme right. At the end of the Cold War, the Western powers led by the US needed a new enemy to replace Communism, and Islam was chosen. Thus a discourse was prepared presenting the Islamic world as atavistic and unable to progress into modernity, as opposed to the claims that the West, or a part of the Western world, was a single and maximum representative of "civilization". Theories such as the "clash of civilizations" advanced by Samuel P. Huntington, influential among the US neocons, defined Islamic culture in this way: "In all these places, the relations between Muslims and peoples of other civilizations... have been generally antagonistic; most of these relations have been violent at some point in the past, many have been violent in the 1990s. Wherever one looks along the perimeter of Islam, Muslims have problems living in peace with their neighbours... Islam has bloody borders (Huntington, "The Clash of Civilisations")"

The configuration of Islam as the new world enemy, especially starting from the attacks of September 11th, has generated a fertile climate for organizations of the right promoting an Islamophobic discourse. In this sense the new extreme right justifies its aversion to Islam not in racist terms of superiority of one race over another, but in terms of cultural differences and identity. The "national preference" applies not only in the areas of work and the economy, but is also extended to the cultural field. In this way the Muslim religion is considered as radically incompatible with Europe because it subverts its traditions, culture and roots. In addition common arguments are used with a "progressive" content in discussions on the veil or niqab or directly assimilating Islam with terrorism, as did Geert Wilders, leader of the Islamophobic Party of Freedom, in his famous documentary *Fitna*. Most of these parties also often link the Muslim population with the rise in crime and public insecurity. This is the case with the Vlaams Belang, whose rejection of immigration is concentrated primarily on Muslims, accused of trafficking in drugs and being responsible for citizen insecurity.

## (In) security

Public insecurity is one of the strong points of the xenophobic discourse against immigration, tiresomely reproduced by all the extreme right parties, assimilating crime, civil insecurity and immigration. In this way the ultra-right parties have sought to show, as if a mathematical formula is involved, that an increase in immigration leads to a rise in crime, in an attempt to present themselves as parties of law and order and defend tough policies against immigration and crime.

This is an old slogan, inherited from the interwar fascisms which used labour conflicts and the rise of Communism to mobilize sectors of the small and medium bourgeoisie in their interests, presenting themselves as the antidote to "chaos and revolution" and the party of "law and order". The enemy of Communism has been supplanted in the discourse and the imagination of the new extreme right by immigration and crime. An enemy that allows you to better mobilize a constituency in times of economic and social crisis before the accelerated changes of capitalist globalization.

This discourse has also been taken on by the conservative and social liberal parties in recent election; in fact one of the reasons for the success of Le Pen in the presidential election of 2002 was not merely to obtain 16.86% of votes in the first round, which allowed him to go on to the second round for the first time in the history of France; but to get the French election campaign to pivot around his two favourite issues, immigration and insecurity. In this context the two major parties, the PS and the UDP, sought to show French voters that they could propose measures as harsh as the FN in these areas.

A circumstance which, among other things, favoured the success of the FN, allowing their candidate to advance to the second round, and proved to be disastrous for the PS that failed to do so. The theme of insecurity and its relationship with immigration has also been used in election campaigns in which the right wing was not present, as it is the case in the Spanish state, where the PP has made statements and proposals which Le Pen himself has signed. This shows a very dangerous trend: the adaptation of part of the discourse of the major parties to far right xenophobic parameters. Including, as in the Spanish case, without electoral competition from extreme right parties.

This type of approach, aimed primarily at capturing the protest vote, has helped fuel xenophobic outbreaks across Europe. In May rumours of the kidnapping of a baby by a gypsy woman in Naples caused an orgy of racist violence against gypsy camps orchestrated by the local mafia, the Camorra. The Italian case is of particular concern, not only because of the proliferation of attacks but also by the reaction of the Berlusconi Government to them. "This is what happens when gypsies steal babies" said Interior Minister Maroni, while his colleague in the Cabinet and head of the Northern League, Umberto Bossi, declared: "The people do what the political class cannot do."

## An "internal" nationalism: national preference

The new right-wing nationalism does not have a foreign mission, motivated by the desire to build an empire or annex the territories of neighbouring states, a factor that proved decisive in the inter-war fascisms. Almost all the old antagonisms and conflicts over territorial disputes in Western Europe, which involved countries such as Germany and France for many years, have now ceased to be relevant. In this new context the ultra-right has had to renew their nationalist discourse, something inherent to these formations, especially when one of their major mobilizing fetishes, the "Communist threat", is no longer effective.

This new right-wing nationalism is structured essentially around the exaltation and preservation of a "national identity" allegedly threatened by the accelerated process of globalization of the economy, culture and communications. It posits a defence of national identity against processes of "global uniformity", trying to capitalize on the uncertainties of this process, such as the breakdown of the welfare state, outsourcing, the crisis of the old model of labour market and fear of the challenge of immigration.

Therefore the new nationalist discourse of the European right occurs as a phenomenon with an internal focus which aims to safeguard national identity against the foreign enemies of immigration, the economic uncertainty of globalization and the cultural colonialism of a single thought exported from the United States.

This program seeks to mobilize an important spectrum of society based on the fears and insecurities that "national primacy" is not only not being applied in the areas of labour and the economy but also in the "cultural" field, with an accelerated process of neoliberalism taking place among the European public, and provide simple identity based solutions to real and complex problems that the parties of the "system" do not know how to or do not want to respond to. In this sense the far right parties try to "overcome" the traditional right-left dichotomy to mobilize their constituencies on the basis of criteria of identity and not of class. Filip Dewinter, a leader of the Vlaams Belang, stated that his party owed its success to the fact of being able of "replace the old division of capital and labour with a new axis which opposed the people and identity to multiculturalism (Casals, X. (2003) "Ultrapatriotas. Extrema derecha y nacionalismo de la guerra fría a la era de la globalización". Barcelona: Crítica: 47).

# "Partidocracy" and the protest vote. The keys to a new populism

The growth and consolidation of a part of the new formations of the far right has played an important role in the ability of these formations to absorb what has been considered as the so-called "protest vote". This acquisition of the protest vote has played a key role in a number of circumstances that the extreme right has skilfully exploited. The first of these has been the process, widely extended in Europe in recent decades, in which both the traditional parties and the structures of government have accentuated the role and place of the leader versus the old forms of more collegiate leaderships, especially in parliamentary systems where the charisma of the head of the government was not indispensable. This can be seen in France where the presidential model was strengthened by the Fifth Republic, and in Germany and in Italy.

This process of strengthening of the figure of the leader at the expense of ideology, an Americanization of European politics, has created a situation favourable to the traditional figure of the leader in the populist formations.

All of the extreme right European formations have built a great part of their success on the popularization of the strong, charismatic leadership of their main leader. The most paradigmatic cases have been that of the French FN with the figure of Le Pen and the Fortuyn list built exclusively around the popularity and image of its leader, Pim Fortuyn. This gradual de-ideologization of European electoral politics has favoured the flourishing of a renewed national populism based on strong leadership. Populist political discourse is affirmed in the idea of the betrayal of the people by the political, cultural and economic elites, concerned exclusively with their caste interests. That is why people need to be organized so that the community can recover the common good. The ideological key of populism lies in the political use of the term people as a political community. An idealized people formed by a majority of ordinary men endowed with an instinct and innate political wisdom who cannot develop because the corrupt governing elites have betrayed them. The organization of the people must be realised through a movement that stands above party and class.

This conception of organization has determined that the majority of organizations of the new right have not taken the name of party but have favoured appellations such as front, bloc, movement, alliance and so on. In addition this conception of the organization stems from the idea of breaking with class conflict as the motor of political debate and collective aggregation, in favour of an inter class union conceived around the idea that the far right accords the people and its interests as national community.

The "people" was the term most repeated by interwar fascism. Nazism

constantly invoked the people and its ideology was inseparable from the idea of the Volksgemeinschaft, the "popular community". The new far right also constantly appeals to the people, but this now has a double meaning: the people is the "national community", but, and this is a fundamental difference with regard to interwar fascism, it is also the custodian of national sovereignty, allegedly confiscated by the political oligarchy and supranational institutions.

While in fascism there is a contempt for democracy, in the post-industrial far right we find a demand for "hyper-democracy". This invocation to recover a democracy taken hostage by a corrupt political oligarchy, which the far right call a "partidocracy", has been one of the fundamental mobilising electoral factors of the extreme right. The electoral success under the banner of genuine democracy of the far right cannot be understood without assessing the democratic deficit of the societies emerging from the systemic transformation of a globalized society and the delegitimization of policy and politics that has occurred in its midst before the devaluation of ideologies. In this context the decline of the traditional left (official Communism), and social democracy transformed into social liberalism and the weakness of the far left, has meant that protest votes faced with the increase in the democratic deficit have gone primarily to the far right.

In short, the national populisms have incarnated a rejection of politics from a purported representation of the democratic system based on the popular interest, which they claim to represent. For the political scientist Ralf Dahrendorf, populism stimulates voluntarily the loss of a proactive role for parliaments and their weakness. The new

populism is not intended to introduce political totalitarianism; instead it wants to "take decisions without too many controls, in the presence of an essentially uninterested and apathetic people". And in many countries "the temporary popularity of a leader is combined with collective indifference to politics, a trend considered long-term and worrying as it generates societies that will increasingly be characterised as democracies without democrats". (Casals, X. op. cit.: 43).

## The leap to the mass media

One of the main barriers preventing the extreme right from completing and strengthening its social and electoral niche has been the media. Their limited presence in the media, especially on the small screen, has acted as a firewall in the Spanish state so far. In fact, most of the successes of the European far right have been preceded by its entry, either as a group or by any of its leaders, in the mass media circus. The political scientists Yves Mény and Yves Surel point out that the leaders of the new right-wing populism "have been able to use the Achilles heel of media society wonderfully, namely its. almost pathological interest in scandal". In the end, national populisms, as Moreau notes, are agencies of symbolic mobilization and require a media presence. They enter into crisis when they have no place or function, but the role of the communications media in developing the creation and eventual erosion of these new political actors (Casals 2003: 53) European reality has shown that once a certain public notoriety and level of social support have been attained by the far right it is almost impossible to remove them from the media scene. The most paradigmatic cases of this tendency are represented by Le Pen and the Front National in France, and Pim Fortuyn in Holland.

## In conclusion

The far right has had a long process of emergence, over at least two and a half decades, a radical right distinct from the interwar fascisms and the associated nostalgic ideas, but at the same time preserving a good part of their worldview and identity. A right-wing that has been able to exploit the contradictions of the system of globalizing neoliberalism of recent decades, providing a unifying discourse, simple but sufficiently complete to set up a specific social and political paradigm, and consolidate a diverse social spectrum. A context of systemic economic crisis, social cutbacks and layoffs, of various forms of unrest, insecurity about the future and the present creates situations capable of connecting with simple answers to complex problems, with scapegoats and neo-populist leaderships of a totalitarian nature, with a far right questioning the system but within its own parameters.

We must be attentive to the processes that are gestating in Europe, not only the anti-capitalist options which are timidly emerging, but also looking sideways to our extreme right, because until now in our state we have not had any far right organization with parliamentary representation, in what some analysts have called the Spanish "exception". It seems that this situation will not last long. The emergence of Platform Per Catalunya, with a real potential to achieve a good result in the coming Catalan elections, could launch a dangerous path of transit for a radical right that has remained underground at the social level and inside the Partido Popular, but that could get its own vehicle to express itself politically. Analyzing the speeches and the key elements in the success of the European far right is urgent and essential to the challenges posed by the crisis.