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The secret of the European right



“Apparently, fundamental political questions regarding political legitimacy, sovereignty or cultural identity are once more on the table” according to Teresa Nogueira Pinto of the GIS geopolitical intelligence services. This claim is key to understanding the reasons behind the strengthening of the populist right in Europe. Most analyses consider the strengthening of the conservative/populist right as an anomaly.

Our analysis sees it more as a consequence of their opponents not talking about questions of sovereignty or cultural identity, or only portraying these in a negative light.

The reason the European far right could gain traction in the past years is because their opponents failed to talk about fundamental issues at the heart of further European convergence. Deeper integration was a given. Thus, when issues of national sovereignty or cultural identity were raised by their opponents, often they were not taken seriously. Their agenda was seen as populist fearmongering or a collection of empty promises. The mainstream elite was the guardian of the European project, they had the expertise managing it, why would they have considered the views of those challenging it? With the 2024 European Parliament elections right around the corner, we look at why it is important that all sides have answers to questions concerning national sovereignty and cultural identity.

The Polish elections seemed to be a turning point in European politics. However, this fails to take into consideration that there has been a significant change in the European right in the past decade. Alongside the Eastern European populist right wing parties a Southern bloc emerged as well. This group can very well alter the face of European politics next year, challenging

the mainstream, more liberal conservative parties such as the European People's Party (EPP). The tide of left wing populist parties that popped up at the time of the 2008 eurozone crisis in Greece, Spain and Portugal has turned. This new brand of populist right wing parties however are very different from what conservatism has been in Europe in the past 70 years. While obviously the parties of the European populist right are very different from one another, what is common amongst them is opposition to migration, further centralizing of the EU, as well as the expansion of global governance. They feel that the mainstream (liberal) European elite has lost touch with voters' needs and instead talks of superficial social conflicts (wokeism).

It is not difficult to see that the parties opposing them feel that answers to the questions raised by this new type of right wing parties are non-negotiable. These are not political issues up for debate, but ideological ones at the core of the European project. Liberal democracy as the end of ideological development, the constant deepening of European integration, the extension of individual freedoms to protect minorities are just some of the most important ideas that cannot be challenged. Anyone that tries to cannot be considered a serious opponent.

The mainstream vision of the future of the European Union is that the EU's developmental path can be extended indefinitely to

include new social groups or policy areas. This is the means to fulfilling the dreams of the Founding Fathers. The new European right however debates whether this was their original intent. They want the EU to return to a previous phase of development when it was less based on issues of identity and more on economic cooperation. The interpretation of human rights was much more narrow at the time (freedom of speech and freedom of the press), while today it has been extended to include much more specific areas (such as LGBTQIA+ rights). It can be said that the EU expected way less from its members in the sense of ideological assimilation. It was content with the acceptance of the idea of a European community and the notion that nations must cooperate. The acceptance of European values has become a benchmark of democratic quality, while the definition of European values has significantly changed, and more specifically, expanded.

The exact meaning of an ever deeper union has been debated for a long time. The new European right holds that this phrase in the 1957 Treaty of Rome symbolized a desire for peace amongst nations following the war. They contest the idea that it was supposed to truly mean a constant turning over of national sovereignty to a central European power until a complete supranational union has been achieved. They feel that the ideal of further cooperation has to be achieved amongst nations, as

without nations, there would have been no EU. As Teresa Nogueira Pinto pointed out in the article previously quoted, this conflict arising from the different perceptions of Europe creates a legitimacy problem. She specifically mentions Ursula von Der Leyen's warning referencing Hungary and Poland, right before the Italian elections leading to Giorgia Meloni's win, referring to the fact that the EU has "tools" should things go "in a difficult direction". The author also mentions the fact that while Viktor Orbán goes against the values of liberalism, electorally speaking, the Hungarian government is one of the most legitimate in the European Union. At the same time, the EU categorizes it as an electoral autocracy.

If we want to understand why Viktor Orbán compares Brussels to Soviet oppression, we have to see that this legitimacy problem is real. Many European voters do not see the above mentioned threats and retributions as the protection of the rule of law or European values. They see it as power struggles, struggles that resemble their daily injustices and lack of agency. The mainstream elite are right in trying to protect European values, at the same time, by not being more flexible, they hand over the opportunity to come up with alternatives to their opponents which in turn become more popular with their solutions favoring nation states. While according to the mainstream view, nation states can be superseded, for the European right, nation states

are the key to revitalizing the EU. These parties want to change the EU so that universalization does not mean uniformity. They feel that when questions of identity become centralized in the name of Europeanization it is not national sovereignty that is compromised, but diversity and pluralism as well. Values that are at the core of European values.

The European right can take advantage of the current situation because in the eyes of the European public, it seems as though a stronger power is trying to force its will on the weaker ones. From this perspective the nation state becomes their protector in face of the oppressor, with the nation guaranteeing freedom and independence. Until the European mainstream understands this correlation, the populist, anti-elite parties can continue to expand unbothered. However, this does not have to be so. The mainstream can also become more flexible in these matters. Flexibility in this case means understanding the problem at hand, and making an offer to those citizens for whom different aspects of European cooperation are important. Most of the time those voters who turn to parties offering alternatives are not anti-European, they simply do not receive satisfactory answers to their questions regarding Europe. They have no other option but to look to those who say they have answers. These voters feel the need to be treated as equals, not second-rate citizens. They also wish to receive an

offer from the European Union in which diversity and inclusion means accepting those for whom a national identity is important as well, not just their European one. They need the reassurance that those values that are often associated with the right (traditional family values, importance of religion etc.) are compatible with European values, not considered archaic.