

The Breakthrough of Neo-Fascism in Europe: A Case of Mistaken Identity

ANIRUDDH MOHAN

In December 2012, the European Union (EU) Parliament adopted a resolution on Ukraine noting with concern that the recently concluded national parliament elections “failed to meet major international standards and constitute a step backwards compared with the national elections in 2010.” Further, the text went on to “express concern about the rising nationalistic sentiment in Ukraine, expressed in support for the Svoboda Party, which, as a result, is one of the two new parties to enter the Verkhovna Rada. It recalls that racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views go against the EU's fundamental values and principles and therefore appeals to pro-democratic parties in the Verkhovna Rada not to associate with, endorse or form coalitions with this party.”¹

In March 2014, following the Euro Revolution in Ukraine, five members of the Svoboda Party held key positions in the national government including that of Deputy Prime Minister. So how was a party so explicitly condemned by the EU as going against its fundamental principles allowed to enter into the political mainstream and form part of the national government? Have the policies of Svoboda changed so drastically in 15 months?

Aniruddh Mohan is a Research Intern at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi, India and holds an MPhil in Nuclear Energy from the University of Cambridge. His research interests include political theory, international relations and nuclear security and non-proliferation. He can be reached at aniruddh.mohan11@gmail.com.

Foreign Policy Journal, April 22, 2014

Svoboda has since its inception in 1991 been described as everything from right-wing to neo-fascist and neo-Nazi. The party consistently maintains that it is not neo-fascist, anti-Semitic, anti-democratic or anti-liberal but merely pro Ukrainian² while political commentators argue that the party's internal agenda and discourse is far more radical and the recent shift towards the center is merely a façade for gaining a larger share of the vote.

The rise of Svoboda in Ukraine is no exercise in exceptionalism. Indeed it conforms to the norm as radical right-wing parties across Europe are currently attracting attention both through their flammable yet increasingly centripetal rhetoric and improving electoral performances. Take for instance the recently concluded elections in France. Marine Le Pen's National Front party won mayoral power in 12 municipalities far exceeding its previous peak of 4 towns in the late 1990s. Although their relative success has been played down by many political scientists in France as simply keeping in line with their national poll performances, Marine Le Pen is confident that the National Front has irretrievably now established itself as the third major political force in France.³

No matter how distant and unrealistic her hopes for becoming President of France are, it is clear that the National Front is now in a position to at least shape some of the debate in French politics and bring to the table issues they feel are critical to the French voter and largely ignored by the conservatives and socialists, namely immigration and EU-skepticism.⁴

In the upcoming European Union parliament elections in May, the National Front is likely to post strong gains along with radical right-wing parties across Europe. It has already announced a pact with the anti-Islamic Party for Freedom in Netherlands led by Geert Wilders and they aim to form a right-wing bloc in the EU parliament to "slay the monster in Brussels".⁵ The pact with Wilders' PVV is part of a larger campaign to form a "European Alliance for Freedom" of the right-wing parties and turn the parliament into a dysfunctional institution. For that they would need caucus status, requiring 25

MEP's from 7 countries. The Le Pen-Wilders alliance is already targeting to bring into the alliance the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, Austria's Freedom party of Heinz-Christian Strache, which recently won more than 20% of seats in recent national elections, and the right-wing Flemish separatists of Vlaams Belang. Le Pen also optimistically hopes for an alliance with Nigel Farage's UKIP which has hitherto rejected such a proposal citing them to be anti-Semitic.⁶

Rise of the radical right

A majority, if not all of these parties have at some stage or another been labelled as fascist.⁷ Affixing the fascist label in order to denigrate is as common as it is effective; fascism, after all, has become inescapably intertwined with violence, mass murder, repression and militaristic ambition.

Two questions emerge from the context above. Why is the radical right-wing on the rise? And are some if not all of these parties embodying a 21st century spin of fascism?

The answer to the first question is more easily found. Across much of Europe today the remnants of the worst economic recession since the 1930's Great Depression are still very much visible. Unemployment—particularly youth unemployment—remains stubbornly high, so-called austerity measures have crippled entire economies, and national parliaments are struggling to reconcile the immediate wishes of the population with the economic policies needed to kick-start long term economic revival and growth. However attributing the rise of right-wing extremist parties to the economic crisis alone as is palpable in political commentary in recent times⁸, is dismissing the long shadow that has been cast by the effects of globalization and modernization, which kick-started the right-wing revival in the early 1990s. A whole range of new social issues and confrontations had triggered a response by the radical right. In the excellent *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty First Century*, published in 2003, a host of experts on the extreme right discuss the growing

threat of the radical right in the years up to and just after the new millennium and why they are in the ascendancy. 2003 was the beginning of the financial boom years. To think of the radical right as on the upswing around the time does not fit into the narrative of a post-economic meltdown crisis of liberalism and individualism.

And yet, at that very time Peter H. Merkl opined in his essay *Stronger than Ever* that advanced democratic societies had undergone tremendous social, political and economic change since the late 1960s with the onset of modernization, replacing old divisions such as the class struggle with new problems such as the digital divide, individualism and the information revolution.⁹ If we take Dieter Rucht's modernization concept to be an increasing autonomy of the individual¹⁰, the dismantling of nationally defined community systems and unlocking of social mobility and segmentation had brought about tremendous societal upheaval. Economic and cultural globalization for the losers meant helplessness, alienation and the rage of being left behind. This in turn gave rise to a quest for a return to traditional roles and social homogeneity. Right-wing radicalism became the effort to undo social change. Furthermore, in the wake of growing immigration and the perceived immigrant threat to national identity, customs and languages, people sought various ways to anchor their cultural and social traditions. Noam Chomsky noted this growing clamor in a 1994 interview stating "In Western Europe, there's an increase in regionalism. This in part reflects the decline of their democratic institutions. As the European Community slowly consolidates towards executive power, reflecting big economic concentrations, people are trying to find other ways to preserve their identity. That leads to a lot of regionalism, with both positive and negative aspects. That's not the whole story, but a lot of it."¹¹

More than ten years on, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the fault lines have deepened and other, new issues have emerged. One of these is the democratic deficit which Chomsky alluded to above. Voter turnout in the European Parliament elections for example has declined in each successive election and has fallen from 62% in 1979 to 43% in 2009. Analysis of individual countries presents an even

bleaker picture. Voter turnout in France for the 2009 elections stood at just above 40% while in the United Kingdom the figure was less than 35%. Slovakia fared the worst with less than 1 in 5 eligible voters casting their vote.¹² Demographic analysis gives little cause for optimism as well. The percentage of young eligible voters who voted in the 2009 elections was almost half as much of the percentage of middle aged-old citizens. While it can be argued that young individuals always vote less than older adults, researchers at the University of Copenhagen points out that today's younger citizens vote 10-15 percentage points less than the baby boomer generation at EP elections and even lesser than the pre-war generation.¹³

Although initial analysis suggested voter alienation could be restricted to "second-order" elections, "first-order" elections i.e. elections for national parliament which directly affect government formation would not be affected¹⁴, it is interesting to note that the National Front benefitted from an all-time high number of abstentions in the recently concluded Municipal elections in France. Nearly two-fifths (38.5 percent) of eligible voters did not bother to cast a ballot. If not yet impacting national assembly elections, the disillusionment has certainly found its way to national politics.

In fact, political commentators have for a long time emphasized protest or 'anti-politics' to be a key factor in accounting for the rise of the extreme right.¹⁵ The argument goes that although these parties more often than not fail to delineate specific policies, they attack the political establishment and find favor with voters keen to express anger and frustration with mainstream parties. Robert O. Paxton in the ground-breaking *The Anatomy of Fascism* noted that a combination of globalization, foreigners, multiculturalism, high taxes and incompetent politicians meant widening public dissatisfaction with the political mainstream in the early 1990s. Paxton further highlighted that the loss of credibility of the Marxist Left after the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the radical right had no rivals as the mouthpiece for the "angry losers of the new post-industrial, globalized, multi-ethnic Europe".¹⁶ Some extreme right groups, such as the FPÖ in Austria have even sought to call themselves a

‘movement’ rather than a party to avoid being consumed in a wide loss of faith in democratic vehicles.

Common ground, for radical right groups across Europe seems to have been readily found in an anti-immigration stance. It is inevitable that any ‘movement’ comes to be identified and associated with a single-issue and immigration has long been the most attractive electoral flavor of the extreme right. Once again, the financial crisis and subsequent rise in unemployment and cuts in welfare have exacerbated an old issue. Immigration, wrote Merkl as far back as 2003, appeared to be the “mighty irritant” stirring up right-wing protest from Austria to California and even Australia.¹⁷

Comparisons between the Europe of today and the post First World War Europe are easy to draw. In the 1920s and 1930s, as Europe recovered from the First World War, a combination of formidable economic and political challenges in Europe, mass unemployment, hyperinflation, and a recently introduced universal suffrage led to the birth of a 20th century political innovation called Fascism. As the traditional ‘isms’ failed to tackle the huge problems, and as conservatives and liberals struggled to mobilize and relate to a mass voter base, fascists surged to the forefront of national consciousness in countries such as Italy and Germany with a mix of populist, nationalist policies. The rise of Fascism was not just restricted to Italy and Germany, with France and Britain both having nascent fascist parties by 1925. However, the exigencies of a set of peculiar circumstances (including but not limited to national decline, humiliation, and greater economic stagnation) meant that fascist acceptance into mainstream politics was only achieved in Italy and Germany, by the National Fascist Party and Nazis respectively.

In these two countries, a publicly endorsed decomposition of individual freedom followed, as civil liberties were willingly forsaken by large segments of the population now brought into the political process and also by a large majority of the bourgeois community hoping for order, economic stability and fearful of a Bolshevik revolution spreading across Europe.¹⁸

“What this collectivist age wants, allows and approves,” as wrote the German novelist Thomas Mann in 1935 “is the perpetual holiday from the self.”

Given the context above, it is tempting to conclude that the radical right across Europe are crypto-fascists who are once again finding the political space to gain mainstream acceptance just as their ideological forerunners once did. However, what is observable is that the right-wing parties currently enjoying popularity are the ones who have successfully worked towards toning down their rhetoric and shifting their orientation more towards the center. This has certainly been the case with the National Front. However to understand the evolutionary shifts in extremist right-wing parties, especially of those who have secured a political space, one needs to go back to the roots of neo-fascist ideology, starting with post Second World War Italy.

Origins of Neo-Fascism

In the first few years after the end of the Second World War in Italy, a multitude of groups arose containing individuals with associations to fascist organizations during the war. The Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) was foremost amongst them, founded by a group of fascist veterans in December 1946. Anti-fascism however, was now the predominant mood and as a result in the first few years the MSI was severely shackled by the law, unable to truly articulate its ideology. In any case it was not even clear what ideology the MSI was willing to commit to in post-war Italy.

As Italy began to enjoy post-war economic revival and transformation to a post-industrial society, fascism and its central tenets began to lose relevance. The MSI was undeniably nationalistic and anti-communistic. Its guiding sentiment was neo-fascist. However in reality, all passionate fascist imagery aside, the MSI had as much policy loyalty to fascism as most Italians. By the 1970s, it had become increasingly clear to MSI's leaders that they would still have to shed more of their fascist baggage and associations in order to gain legitimacy in a fully pluralistic democratic environment.

Giorgio Almirante, who regained party leadership in 1969 began to shape MSI's political thinking towards that of the "right" rather than "Fascist".¹⁹ Almirante insisted, "We have no intention of restoring fascism", but added, "nor will we surrender before the negative logic of antifascism. We would be the architects of a postfascism, that is to say of an era that will belong finally to all Italians of good will."²⁰

When Almirante stepped down as leader on account of poor health in 1987, his protégé Gianfranco Fini assumed leadership of the party. By the mid 1990's the MSI had become increasingly relevant as a political force within the confines of democracy. Fini had continued the orientation of party policies begun by Almirante and in 1994 Fini chose a new name for the party, the Alleanza Nazionale – the National Alliance. The leadership of the Alleanza prepared a document outlining its vision for Italy titled *Pensiamo l'Italia: Il domani c'è già* (Thinking about Italy: The Future is Now). The document explicitly rejected totalitarianism, dictatorship of any kind, racism, and anti-Semitism, and advocated reform within the limits of "freedom and liberty as unimpeachable values."²¹ The postfascist transition was complete. In June 1994 the Alleanza Nazionale won eleven seats in the European Parliament. After the national elections in 2001, with Berlusconi sworn in as Italy's Prime Minister, Fini assumed the responsibilities of Deputy Prime Minister.

For Stanley G. Payne, an authority on European Fascism, there was no doubt. The Alleanza Nazionale was simply a "moderately rightist, nationalist, parliamentary party."²² Despite everything it advocated and did to the contrary however, the Alleanza are to remain forever neo-fascist, cryptofascist or quasifascist in the eyes of many.²³

The National Front (FN) are not without the same problems. Founded in 1972, by the leaders of the Ordre nouveau, the FN under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen initially tried to attract anti-republicans, authoritarians, conservative Catholics and racists.²⁴ In none of the elections prior to 1983 did the FN attract more than 1 percent of the national vote and the party reached its low-point in 1981 when Le Pen was not able to find the required 500 sponsors for

his presidential candidacy. In 1983 however, the FN found its entry point through the local elections for a Paris suburb and subsequently in the 1984 European elections. Since then the national vote share of the FN has stabilized at around 15 percent, apart from a brief decline in the late 1990s following a split with the newly formed National Republican Movement (MNR) and in the late 200s following financial difficulties. Following the retirement of Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2010, his daughter, Marine Le Pen took over leadership of the party and began steps to soften its xenophobic image.²⁵

Many familiar reasons can be found for the rapid electoral success of the FN, such as a growing dissatisfaction with the established parties and an increasing sense of cultural and economic crisis in France. In their essay *French National in Context: French and European Dimensions*, Minkenberg and Schain argue, however, that the FN also immensely benefited from an “ambiguous platform” and a “flexible strategy” and although immigration became the FN’s major campaign theme, the party’s ideology was more comprehensive and defied the idea of a single-issue movement.²⁶ Its ever evolving and changing ideology was reflected by its economic thinking. In the 1980s, its economic program was largely modelled on the Reagan/Thatcher model of market liberalism and anti-statism, it was seen within the party as pro-American and more or less pro-European with frequent references to the New Right in both the United States and Britain. However in the 1990s, its thinking changed. Following the Gulf War and the Maastricht Referendum, the FN began to reverse its issue orientation.²⁶ Jean-Marie Le Pen began to question the influence of the United States on the global economy and the *raison d’être* of the NATO alliance, all of which would now be woven into an anti-globalization, anti-EU doctrine.²⁷

Jean-Marie Le Pen’s statement about the Holocaust being a historical ‘detail’, the disguised anti-Semitism and some similarities between Hitler and Le Pen in charisma and appeal have led many to see elements within the FN as fascist and the party as a threat to French democracy.²⁸ However, few populist, radical ideas aside, the FN has little in common with fascist ideology. It neither advocates a

dismantling of the democratic system nor proposes a corporatist economy and a societal order dictated by social Darwinism. Furthermore, under Marine Le Pen, the party has increasingly toned down its radical and extremist sentiments, began overtures towards French Jews and has attacked political commentators and journalists who describe the party as far-right in a way that associates it with Nazism, racism, anti-Semitism, and murder.²⁹ That the softening of the party's image and thinking has begun to pay electoral dividends is difficult to dispute, Marine Le Pen gained 17.9 percent of the national vote in the 2012 presidential elections, exceeding the record of her father in 2002 and the recent victories of the FN in the mayoral elections of 2014 exceeds their peak in the 1990s.

Conclusions

A study of the evolution of the radical right in Europe since the late 1960s has shown us that some of the assumptions commonly held today about far right parties are simply not persuasive; namely, the assertion that the economic crisis has led to a sudden emergence of such parties, or that they can be classified as fascist, neo-fascist, or cryptofascist.

Instead, one can observe that with the decline of the smokestack industry, the onset of modernization, globalization and accompanied accelerated social and cultural change, voter attachment to traditional ideologies of both the left and right has been undermined. The search for new political values and identities opened up mobilization potential for the 'normal pathological' right wing.³⁰ This is no crisis du jour.

What has emerged in the 21st century is a toned down, contemporary, right-wing radicalism which finds expression in a form of exclusionary populism, but is determined to advance change through democratic frameworks by gaining political legitimacy and credibility. The success of the radical right in the late 20th and early 21st century is not its breakthrough into full power, which it might never achieve, but its ability to gain sufficient political space to impact agenda

formation and policy development even when outside governing coalitions.³¹

It is unfortunate that the analysis accompanying this emergence of the new radical right has often fallen on unfounded bias and on labeling that has jumped the gun, pressured to redress by the burden of history. It is commonplace to fence in everyone from soccer hooligans to adolescent skinheads to overzealous tax protesters to Euro-skeptics and ethno-nationalists in the neo-fascist domain. The easy transition from right-wing extremism to neo-fascism and neo-Nazism offers an attractive dilution of the ideas advocated by radical right-wing parties today. What is less recognized is that the parties gaining momentum and national credibility such as the FN in France and the UKIP in Britain are ones that have rejected the racism, anti-Semitism, and ethno-nationalism prevalent in parties that are members of the European National Front, such as the Golden Dawn in Greece.

The most prominent and successful late 20th and early 21st century European radical right movements have not contained classical fascist themes such as attacks on democratic institutions of law, the liberty of the market and individualism, or advocacy of national expansion by war. The eugenic temptation which runs so deep in fascist ideology remains absent. That is not to say however that a 'fascism of the present' is inconceivable, or that it must resemble classical fascism in all its entirety. Instead, to understand how a modern functional equivalent of fascism may gain mass following, we need to subscribe to analytical rigor and astute comparisons while forsaking attention to superficial symbolism, so often a useful companion of an exercise in sophistry.

Finally, as Paxton observes, fascist advance depends largely on human choices.³² The fact that the majority of people in post-war Europe have thus far refused to endorse extremist, radical, reactionary thinking³³ even when faced with a serious economic crisis, gives reason to cheer.

References

¹ European Parliament. "Texts adopted - Thursday, 13 December 2012 - Situation in Ukraine - P7_TA-PROV (2012)0507." n.d.

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0507+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

² Herszenhorn, David M., "Ukraine's Ultranationalists Show Surprising Strength at Polls." *New York Times*. November 8, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/world/europe/ukraines-ultranationalists-do-well-in-elections.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>.

³ Ghosh, Palash. "French Municipal Elections: Far-Right National Front Scores Impressive Gains, But Hopes For Real Political Power Remain A Fantasy." *International Business Times*. March 31, 2014.

<http://www.ibtimes.com/french-municipal-elections-far-right-national-front-scores-impressive-gains-hopes-real-political>.

⁴ Rubin, Allisa J., "National Front Wins Support and Elections." *New York Times*. April 1, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/02/world/europe/moderation-pays-off-for-a-far-right-party-in-france.html?r=0>.

⁵ Traynor, Eric. "Le Pen and Wilders forge plan to 'wreck' EU from within." *The Guardian*. November 13, 2013.

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/13/le-pen-wilders-alliance-plan-wreck-eu>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Draitser, Eric. "Ukraine and the Rebirth of Fascism in Europe." *Global Research*. January 31, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/ukraine-and-the-rebirth-of-fascism-in-europe/5366852>.

⁸ Smith-Spark, Laura. "Anger at austerity, immigration feeds far right's rise in Europe." *CNN*. May 9, 2012.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/08/world/europe/europe-far-right-austerity>.

⁹ Merkl, Peter H. "Stronger than ever." In *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century*, by Peter H. Merkl (Eds.) and Leonard Weinberg (Eds.). London: Frank Cass, 2003.

¹⁰ Rucht, Dieter. *Modernisierung und neue soziale Bewegungen: Deutschland, Frankreich und USA im Vergleich*. Frankfurt: Campus, 1994.

¹¹ Chomsky, Noam, David Barsamian, and Arthur Naiman. *How the World Works*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2011.

¹² European Parliament. "Turnout (1979-2009)." n.d. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-%281979-2009%29.html>.

¹³ Bhatti, Yosef, and Kasper M. Hansen. "Turnout at European Parliament elections is likely to continue to decline in the coming decades." *EUROPP*. July 25, 2013. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/07/25/turnout-at-european-parliament-elections-is-likely-to-continue-to-decline-in-the-coming-decades/>.

¹⁴ Grand, Peter, and Guido Tiemann. "Low turnout in European Parliament elections is driven by the perception that the process is not rewarding enough for voters." *EUROPP*. August 9, 2012. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2012/08/09/turnout-european-parliament/>.

¹⁵ Eatwell, Roger. "Ten Theories of the Extreme Right." In *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century*, by Peter H. Merkl (Eds.) and Leonard Weinberg (Eds.). London: Frank Cass, 2003.

¹⁶ Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. New York: Knopf, 2004.

¹⁷ Merkl, Peter H. "Stronger than ever." Op. cit.

¹⁸ Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Op. cit.

¹⁹ Gregor, A. James. *The Search for Neofascism: The Use and Abuse of Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²⁰ Almirante, Giorgio. *Autobiografia di un "fucilatore"*. Milano: Edizioni del Borghese, 1974.

²¹ Gregor, A. James. *The Search for Neofascism: The Use and Abuse of Social Science*. Op. cit.

²² Payne, Stanley G. *Fascism, Comparison and Definition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980.

²³ Gregor, A. James. *The Search for Neofascism: The Use and Abuse of Social Science*. Op. cit.

²⁴ Camus, J. Y. "Origine et formation du Front National, 1972-1981." In *Le Front national à découvert*, by P. Perrineau (Eds.) and N. Mayer (Eds.). Paris: Pr. de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Polit., 1989.

²⁵ Ghosh, Palash. "French Municipal Elections: Far-Right National Front Scores Impressive Gains, But Hopes For Real Political Power Remain A Fantasy." Op. cit.

²⁶ Michael Minkenberg, Martin Schain. "French National in Context: French and European Dimensions." In *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century*, by Peter H. Merkl (Eds.) and Leonard Weinberg (Eds.). London: Frank Cass, 2003.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Todd, Tony. "Don't call us 'far right', says France's Marine Le Pen." *France 24*. October 4, 2013. <http://www.france24.com/en/20131004-marine-le-pen-france-national-front-far-right-press-politics/>.

³⁰ Michael Minkenberg, Martin Schain. "French National in Context: French and European Dimensions." Op. cit.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Op. cit.

³³ Mudde, Cas. “Contrary to popular opinion, Europe has not seen a sharp rise in far-right support since the start of the crisis.” *EUROPP*. August 22, 2013. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/08/22/contrary-to-popular-opinion-europe-has-not-seen-a-rise-in-far-right-support-since-the-start-of-the-crisis/>