

European Interview

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European Interview with Pascal Perrineau on the Rise of National Populism in Europe

"National-populism is rising in some European countries but we cannot call this an all-inclusive, inevitable trend".

1. What does the idea of "national-populism" in Europe encompass exactly? Can all parties that lie on the far right of the political scale be qualified as "national populists?"

The idea of national-populism came from Pierre-André Taguieff who in his work *"L'Illusion populiste"* (Berg International 2002), distinguished between two main types of populism: on the one hand we have protest populism in which the elites are condemned; there is an assertion of absolute confidence in the "people" and exaggerated democratism that idealises the image of the active citizen; on the other hand there is identity populism when the call made to the people focuses on the nation – in this form the rejection of the elites goes hand in hand with a rejection of "foreigners" and an exclusionary stance fuels "scapegoating". Most parties on the far right in Europe bear these elements that define identity populism which Pierre-André Taguieff qualifies as "national-populism".

2. Is there not an equivalent on the far left? What differentiates it from national populism at base?

An entire section of the far left or the "left of the left" deploys a type of populism, but it is rather more "protest" than "identity" in nature. The ways the elites are vilified, the rift between "those on the bottom" and "those at the top", the vehemence of the tone employed, the lack of concern with regard to whether the measures put forward can really be applied and a certain amount of demagoguery are all to be found in the discourses and stances of many leaders of both extremes.

3. How do you see the rise of national-populism in the European Union? Do you think we should see it as a temporary phenomenon or is it a sign of a durable development in political balances of power? What are the causes of this? Could far left populism be as successful?

National-populism is rising in some European countries but we cannot call this an all-inclusive, inevitable trend. The excellent results achieved by the Progress Party in Norway, Christoph Blöcher's UDC in Switzerland, the Jobbik movement in Hungary, the Freedom Party led by Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party in Denmark, both far right parties (FPÖ and BZÖ) in Austria and even the Ataka movement in Bulgaria all bear witness to the electoral dynamic of national populism. The reasons behind this are multiple and structural. The economic and social crisis that flared up after the financial crash in autumn 2008 revealed the weaknesses of post-industrial societies and led to deep seated discontent amongst the popular classes who were the first victims of unemployment, relocation and a decline in purchasing power. The discourses in support of economic protectionism put forward by the national-populist forces sometimes strike a chord with the concerns of the lower classes. Questions raised by entire parts of our societies with regard to the virtues of opening – whatever its nature – economic (globalisation), political (European integration) or societal (the increasing cosmopolitan nature of our societies) are far reaching and the idea of focusing "national" put forward by the national populist parties finds an echo in the doubts raised about the benefits of opening. Finally scepticism

and mistrust with regard to governments and more widely the political world are constantly gaining ground. Because of its contentious, sometimes anti-parliamentarian nature national-populism is extremely skilled in "*politicising*" the "*rejection of the political classes*". We should also note that recently these parties have developed the ability to absorb democratic and republican values, such as gender equality, the dignity of the woman, freedom of thought and even secularity which are said to be under the threat of a radical type of Islam at the very centre of European societies and more generally across the world.

Since many concerns that torment the electorate of various European countries involve issues of identity, populism on the far left is not such a good vent for these fears and problems as on the far right.

4. What do the national-populist parties accuse the European Union of exactly?

Many of these parties see the European Union as an ideal "*scapegoat*" simply because of its transnational nature, of its supposed inability provide effective protection against the consequences of globalisation, of accentuating the loss of national references deemed as being the only strong links in citizenship and identity and last but not least it is not considered to be a "*legitimate*" political power with an anchor amongst the "*people*".

5. What is the common ideological base shared by all of these parties on the far right? Much is said about the elements which make their discourse distinct but are there any basic differences associated with heterogeneous, specific national situations. Can you give us a typology of these parties?

The successful parties in Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria and even in Denmark, Hungary and Belgium are all very different. Some are based on a true far right tradition that goes hand in hand with ultra-nationalism, xenophobia and an authoritarian culture (Vlaams Belang in Flanders, Jobbik in Hungary, FPÖ and BZÖ in Austria), others belong rather more to a populist right marked by an anti-State, anti-fiscal tradition (the Progress Party in Norway, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands). But in spite of these real differences these movements all share some elements to greater or less degree: the ack-

nowledgement of the authority of a more or less charismatic leader, extreme nationalist sensitivity, the ability to play the field of heterophobia, scepticism or hostility with regard to European integration, a concern with the theme of "*law and order*", an ability to activate hostile reaction to immigration and finally economic protectionism that is an extension of cultural protectionism.

6. The behaviour of parties on the traditional right is ambiguous with regard to the far right. On the one hand they have tried to demonise their discourse in order to exclude them from political debate and on the other we perceive ideological permeability between these two lines of thought as seen for example in the toughening up on immigration laws by the Cameron government in the UK and the decision taken by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban to offer Hungarian nationality to Hungarian speaking minorities living outside of Hungary. How do you explain this ambivalence?

For several decades now the far right and more widely speaking national-populism has placed many themes on the political agenda which until now were not the first priority in political life in Europe. Of course from the 1980's on immigration and insecurity were at the heart of this review of the political agenda. It was during the time in office of Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, who spoke of "*good questions*" to which the Front National provided "*bad answers*". Since then the range of these new issues has spread to the condemnation of European integration, the stigmatisation of globalisation and even the rejection of Islam. Both the European right and left have had to take heed. Here and there strategic rapprochements have taken place (Austria, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands), themes have been adopted and alliances have been formed (Austria, Italy and also Slovakia where the left came to an agreement with the far right and local populists). The right is affected more often than the left by this competition but the latter is not safe either particularly in the electoral race for votes from the working class.

7. Various options to counter the rise of far right parties in Europe have been put forward: the conclusion of parliamentary and governmental agreements between government parties on the ri-

ght and the far right (as happened in Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy) which deemed that participation in government by the latter would lead to its normalisation, the demonization of its positions and even the adoption of its discourse. Do you think that there is a miracle solution?

There is no miracle solution and situations vary from one nation to another. In certain cases an alliance can help to trivialise the far right, to force its decline and even divide it (the case in Austria). In other circumstances an alliance has enabled it to grow stronger (the case of the Northern League in Italy). Demonization has helped contain it (the case of France in the 1990's) but stigmatization has been used by some far right parties, turning this situation round so that they stand as "victims". The only effective solution is to take on board the issues that feed surges in national-populism and to draw up firm, serious answers and avoid any xenophobic deviation. Silence, indignation or a follow-my-leader attitude are not adequate or satisfactory answers. In terms of insecurity, immigration, globalisation and relations with "others" there is political work to be done – answers have to be drawn up based on democratic values which prevail in most European societies. These observations call for a real turn-about in terms of political imagination.

8. In your opinion what significant effects might the long term establishment of national-populism have in Europe? Can it have any great influence on dominant political discourse on immigration and identity and in the end lead to intransigence in terms of identity in Europe?

Intransigence with regard to identity is already forming in many European countries. Responses like those put forward by the national-populists have gained ground. Given these issues an interesting period is now starting in which a colossal challenge is being launched against the governments both on the moderate right and left for them to come up with some credible, strong answers with regard to identity and immigration. In addition to this these answers cannot be put forward without an accompanying discourse that is just as sound with regard to the advantages provided by an open society from an economic, social and political point of view. The discourse on these issues cannot just go with the flow nor can it be defensive.



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