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Disunited they stand

Debunking the myth of a right-wing international front

These are heady days for Europe's right-wing demagogues. Emboldened by Donald Trump's reign in the White House, the continent's populists are confident their time has finally come. In a year of crucial elections in four of the six EU founding members, those on the political fringes expect to make significant gains. In the Netherlands, far-right leader Geert Wilders is topping the polls, whilst in France, the *Front National's* Marine le Pen is projected to emerge triumphant in the first round of presidential elections in April. And in Germany, the anti-migration *Alternative für Deutschland* is all but guaranteed to enter Parliament in September – an unprecedented shift in the nation's post-war politics.

Europe's populists are already popping the champagne. A few weeks ago, leaders from the continent's far-right parties gathered in the German city of Koblenz for what was provocatively labelled a "European counter-summit". Delegates basked in the glory of political success, toasted the victory of Donald Trump and called for a return to the golden age of national sovereignty. "In 2017, the people of continental Europe will wake up", proclaimed Le Pen to a cheering hall of loyalists from France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. The message was clear: Europe's far-right stands united.

The fragile façade of unity

However, with right-wing populists all that glistens is not gold. In fact, the notion of an international populism that fuses Europe's distinct right-wing groups into one coherent movement is more a canny marketing ploy than reality. Certainly, they share common ground: their attacks on "disconnected" political elites and their relentless criticism of multiculturalism and immigration – in particular from Islamic countries – bind them together. Beyond that, however, their ideology of division does not unite but keeps them apart.

Take Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*. Recent polls show the party is expected to receive around 12% of the votes in September's federal elections. Originally founded to protest Berlin's stance in the Greek

economic and financial crisis, the party soon became a staunch critic of Angela Merkel migration policies and increasingly played to the far-right spectrum of German politics. The right-wingers gained the upper hand when they forced the party's leader and founder, Bernd Lucke, to quit.

Now, it seems, the party is going through another period of infighting. Just last week, the party board started an exclusion procedure against Björn Höcke, a prominent AfD leader from Thuringia. In January, Höcke caused uproar when he gave a speech in Dresden - later uploaded to YouTube - challenging Germany's sense of guilt over its Nazi past. He is heard decrying his country's "mentality of a totally vanquished people" and dubbing the Berlin Holocaust memorial a "monument of shame".

On the surface, the current struggle within the AfD is about the party's position on Germany's troubled past. On a deeper level, it concerns the party's ultimate objectives. Is the AfD calling for evolution or revolution? While Höcke warns against the temptations of political power in Berlin, party leader Frauke Petry is trying to steer the party towards political engagement and away from the worst examples of extremist incitements. Indeed, the AfD's own manifesto states that "any enlargement of the voter base can only happen by increasingly distancing the party from the far-right".

Family politics

In many ways, the internal struggle within the AfD is reminiscent of Marine Le Pen's public clash with her father – and predecessor as party leader – over his whitewashed version of French history, calling Nazi gas chambers a mere "detail" of history. But it is not the only similarity. Just as the AfD is divided between better-off supporters in the West of Germany and a poorer, and more radical eastern wing, so too is the Front National confronted with regional divisions, with a statist northern block, largely supported by former socialist or communist voters, battling with a more economically liberal camp in the south. Just as in Germany, also in France the different party wings are currently held together by the promise of electoral success. But the image of unity may prove precarious in the wake of elections.

Divisions within individual parties are mirrored by major differences between right-wing parties in Europe. They can't even agree on how to deal with their favourite political nemesis, the European Union. While the *Front National* calls for an immediate exit from the Union, Norbert Hofer of the Austrian *Freedom Party* says a referendum on membership is only necessary if Turkey is allowed to join. And Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* hopes to reform, not necessarily leave the EU.

Even more pronounced are the differences concerning NATO. The *AfD* considers the military alliance "crucial in binding Europe and the US together", and its leader Petry recently has hailed it "an important balancing factor between East and West". In contrast Marine Le Pen believes NATO "serves only Washington's objectives". And Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders does not wish for the Netherlands, but for Turkey, to leave the alliance. The sooner NATO "gets rid of this Trojan horse, the better", Wilders proclaims.

Who should hold the purse strings?

The economy, too, is hugely contentious. While many right-wing populists in Europe have shifted towards protectionism and redistribution, this trend is by no means universal. Austria's *Freedom Party* makes the neo-liberal claim that "performance must be rewarded", while their neighbours from the *Swiss People's Party* rally against deficit spending and call for lower taxes. Similarly, Germany's populist-right staunchly advocates for limiting public administration and aims to remove state subsidies.

The incompatibility with the French *Front National* could not be more apparent. Its leaders pledge to raise the minimum wage, enhance labour protections and to keep the retirement age at 60. Marine Le Pen frequently agitates against "oligarchs" and "multinationals". In fact, the Front rejects the very policies that their partners outside of France are so rigorously promoting. In Berlin, some on the populist fringes are reluctant to close ranks with a "socialist party such as the Front National", as one prominent party-leader recently put it.

Instead of buying into populist propaganda, European voters need to see the facade of right-wing harmony for what it is: a publicity stunt based not on common interests but on the glossing over of differences. Europe's far-right parties find their very meaning in nationalism and division. Presenting a united, international front is contradictory and absurd. It's time to call the populists' bluff.



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