Door Open or Door Closed?

Reflections on How to Deal with Far-Right Parties in Europe

Interjection

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In a Nutshell

Parties that are positioned to the right of the European People's Party (EPP) do not form a homogeneous bloc; rather, they differ significantly in both programme and political style.

To make an assessment on a case-by-case basis, it is helpful to be guided by clear criteria. A party's stance on Russia, the EU, and the rule of law should be taken into account, as should its degree of radicalisation.

A comparison between Germany and Austria reveals that there is no clear correlation between inclusion or exclusion on the one hand and the success of right-wing populist parties on the other hand. The exclusion of the AfD in Germany and the integration of the FPÖ in Austria have led to the same outcome: Both parties have become more radical and more successful than ever.

Centre-right parties should focus on developing independent responses to the concerns that resonate with their potential voters. Greece's Nea Dimokratia and Spain's Partido Popular have been successful with this approach in recent years.

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If a state election were to be held in Saxony-Anhalt next Sunday, the result might look something like this: Christian Democrats (CDU), 26 %; Social Democrats (SPD), 8 %; Greens (Bündnis90/Die Grünen), 3 %; Liberals (FDP), 2 %; The Left (Die Linke), 11 %; BSW (social-conservative Left), 5 %; AfD (right-wing populists), 39 %.[1] At least in eastern Germany, this reflects a development that has long been common in other parts of Europe and the world: Right-wing populist and far-right parties are achieving record results and putting increasing pressure on established competitors within the party system.

Christian democratic and conservative parties in particular have a key role to play in responding to this challenge: They are the ones who largely determine how to deal with competition from the far right. It is they who make the strategic choices that range from strict exclusion or tolerance models to attempts at constructive engagement, cooperation, and even inclusion in government. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the analysis more closely.

There's right-wing, and then there's right-wing

Whether in the rhetoric of the much-publicised *Omas gegen rechts* ("Grandmas Against the Right") or in the frequently invoked "fight against the right" heard in parts of the centre-left, actors from the Christian democratic and conservative spectrum are still routinely lumped together with right-wing populist and far-right actors, at least rhetorically. However, even a cursory glance at the party-political landscape to the right of centre indicates that differentiation is urgently needed. This applies not only to the crucial distinction between parties of the centre-right and those on the far right, but also within the wide range of parties commonly labelled right-wing populist, far-right, radical right, and extremist. In Europe, this concerns parties in the European Parliament that sit to the right of the European People's Party and that are organised in the groups of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the Patriots for Europe (PfE), and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN).

What is often overlooked is that these groups not only differ from one another, but also contain significant ideological differences within their own ranks. In order to navigate the classification of individual parties along the spectrum from right-conservative to right-wing populist and far-right, it is helpful to refer to three criteria introduced to the debate by EPP party and group leader Manfred Weber[2]:

1. *Attitudes towards the European Union:* This concerns loyalty to EU institutions, positions on weakening or dismantling these institutions, calls for national withdrawal, and the overall tone adopted towards the EU.

2. *Attitudes towards Russia:* This includes support for Ukraine, such as arms deliveries, backing sanctions against Russia as the aggressor, and a clear commitment to defending Europe against Russia's hybrid warfare.

3. *Attitudes towards the rule of law:* This relates to potential actions against judicial and media systems at the national level if the party is in government as well as to the actual implementation of rule-of-law mechanisms and to adherence to legal norms at the EU level.

Examining the ECR through the lens of these three core questions quickly reveals that it is far from a homogeneous grouping. Fratelli d'Italia

and the Sweden Democrats now present themselves as being significantly less Eurosceptic and more rule-of-law-oriented than in the past, while Poland's PiS pursues a strong pro-Ukraine line but systematically undermined the rule of law while in government. Meanwhile, the Czech ODS combines occasional Euroscepticism with a clearly pro-Ukraine stance and a commitment to rule-of-law principles. There are no reports of comparable rule-of-law backsliding either in Italy under Fratelli's leadership or in Sweden, where the government is supported by the Sweden Democrats.

Even the PfE – who are typically positioned further to the right – show neither clear differentiation from other actors nor strong internal cohesion. The AfD originally belonged to the PfE but was considered too radical – particularly by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National – and was forced to leave the group. Now part of the newly formed ESN Group, it aligns on most issues with the FPÖ and Fidesz, both of which remain within the PfE. Despite its Euroscepticism and strong criticism of migration, VOX emphasises the overall usefulness of the EU, supports sanctions against Russia, and adopts at least an ambivalent position on the rule of law.

Some far-right parties promote an alternative, more authoritarian model of the state.

As such, initial analyses of voting behaviour in the 10th European Parliament confirm that cohesion within the PfE, ECR, and ESN is significantly lower than within the EPP. There is no question regarding the existence of any uniform ideological orientation across the right-wing populist and at-times-far-right camp in the European Parliament.[3]

Another distinguishing feature among parties to the right of the EPP is their degree of radicalisation. While some far-right parties view themselves as part of the democratic system and are willing to cooperate with parties of the political centre, others deliberately position themselves as anti-system actors and promote an alternative, more authoritarian model of the state. The spectrum here ranges from comparatively moderate actors such as the Czech ODS to extremist Greek micro-parties and Poland's Konfederacja, which presents itself as an anti-system alternative to the PiS.

For this reason, decisions on how to deal with parties to the right of the EPP depend largely on whether the parties in question are radical, authoritarian-populist anti-system actors at the extreme end of the far-right spectrum or partly populist but otherwise more moderate parties at the other end of the spectrum. Anyone who lumps together all parties to the right of the political centre fails to recognise the political realities. Differences in ideological orientation, degrees of radicalisation, and varying levels of willingness to cooperate with the political centre should be the starting point for any strategic decision.

The German–Austrian paradox

One of the peculiarities of political debate is that even in the face of global challenges, cause-and-effect relationships are often treated as if it were possible to reduce them to the national context. For years, it was possible to argue that the rise of the AfD in Germany was primarily the consequence of what was seen as an overly liberal course pursued by CDU leader and Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, only for the subsequent shift in power to Friedrich Merz to be blamed for the very same phenomenon, this time attributed to a conservative change of course and an alleged convergence with "AfD positions". Whether intentional or not, such blame-shifting overlooks both the fact that the growing success of right-wing and in some cases also left-wing populist parties and movements has long become a pan-European and indeed global phenomenon and the fact that Germany is merely catching up with developments that are further advanced in many other countries within and beyond Europe.

A look at individual European countries reveals the limited effectiveness of national strategies in dealing with far-right parties: However different the strategies adopted towards these parties may be, the outcomes are remarkably similar. This is nowhere more evident than in a comparison between Germany and Austria. While the success of the AfD is a relatively recent phenomenon in Germany, modern right-wing populism was – in a sense – pioneered in Austria and therefore has a much longer track record of success. As early as in the first years of the 2000s, the first federal government formed by the ÖVP and FPÖ caused considerable controversy, particularly in Germany, and Austria found itself largely isolated in Europe for a time.

Coalitions to the right of centre are now commonplace in many European countries.

Today, almost a quarter of a century later, the German perspective on developments in Austria has shifted. Where a coalition between a centre-right and a right-wing populist party was still the exception 25 years ago, coalitions to the right of centre are now commonplace in many European countries. Germany remains different in this regard. While the metaphorical firewalls have gradually been dismantled across most of Europe, the CDU and CSU have thus far successfully resisted entering into cooperation with right-wing populists and have in so doing become the exception in Europe.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the differences between Germany's approach to the AfD and Austria's approach to the FPÖ can primarily be explained by differences between the parties themselves. Indeed, this is not the case. A comparative study commissioned by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Vienna concluded that the similarities between the AfD and the FPÖ far outweigh the differences: *Nicht gleich, aber sehr ähnlich* ("Not identical, but very similar") – such is the study's self-explanatory title.[4]

In all internal party conflicts in recent years, the more radical factions have prevailed in both the AfD and the FPÖ. Both are radical, anti-European far-right parties with an affinity for authoritarian governments and with personal links to far-right milieus. Where differences in programme or voter base do emerge, these differences are generally minor and can largely be explained by the fact that unlike the comparatively young AfD, the FPÖ has succeeded in establishing itself over the decades as a largely "normal" actor within Austria's party system.

This is where the truly significant difference between Austria's FPÖ and Germany's AfD lies: namely in the way each party is treated in society. While the AfD in Germany continues to be treated as a political pariah, the FPÖ in Austria has long become socially and politically acceptable. Despite rising support at the ballot box, particularly in eastern Germany, the AfD remains excluded from any participation in government. By contrast, the FPÖ is able to look back on several decades of participation in both regional and federal governments. Much of what still causes intense alarm in the German discourse surrounding the AfD has long since become normalised in Austria.

Nevertheless, however different Austria's approach to the FPÖ may be compared with Germany's approach to the AfD, the outcome is paradoxically similar and indeed sobering. In Austria, the normalisation of the FPÖ has ultimately been just as ineffective at achieving the desired outcome as has the exclusion of the AfD in Germany. On the contrary, despite diametrically opposed strategies in dealing with far-right competitors, the result in both cases is virtually identical: The AfD and the FPÖ are today more radical and more successful than ever.

Those who instead pin their hopes on hybrid approaches such as selective cooperation, the toleration of minority governments, or conditional inclusion are likely to be disappointed, as well. Thus far, none of these strategies has succeeded anywhere in Europe in producing a lasting and effective remedy against the success of right-wing populist and far-right parties.

What can be done?

As if the rise of far-right parties across Europe were not already cause for concern, there is much to suggest that it is a trend that will not easily be reversed. This is primarily because in many cases, voters of far-right parties are no longer protest voters. On the contrary, compared with parties of the political centre, voter volatility among AfD supporters, for example, is particularly low: Only 30 per cent state in surveys that they could imagine voting for a party other than the AfD. This means that among all parties represented in the Bundestag, the AfD has the largest core electorate.[5]

How difficult it may be to win back this potential for the political centre is suggested by two sociological bestsellers that examine the deeper causes behind the success of right-wing populist movements. In *Zerstörungslust*,[6] Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey analyse a development that they view as crucial to the success of right-wing populist movements worldwide: The authors argue that people socialised in democratic systems develop a desire to tear down liberal and democratic institutions when the promises of liberal modernity – namely social mobility, self-determination, and future prospects – are no longer fulfilled. Instead, frustration, fear of status loss, and nihilism come to dominate. This destructive attitude leads sections of the population to support actors and parties that seek to attack and undermine the existing democratic order.

A similar line of argument can be found in the book *Misstrauensgemeinschaften*[7] by Aladin El-Mafalaani, in which the author reveals that modern societies are increasingly held together not by shared values, but by shared distrust. Different groups – such as social milieus, generations, and cultural communities – develop strong internal cohesion but define themselves primarily through demarcation and suspicion

Far right, yet broadly acceptable: Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has so far presented herself as a constructive actor at the European and international level. Photo: © Frank Ossenbrink, Imago.

Eyes straight ahead: Spain's Partido Popular has demonstrated how a centre-right party can confidently put forward policy proposals on the issues that concern potential voters – without constantly looking over its shoulder to the right. Pictured: party leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo. Photo: © Europa Press, Imago.

towards others as well as towards state institutions. Distrust becomes the social glue of these communities, which grow increasingly entrenched and drift ever further away from the state and the majority society.

Across almost all of Europe, the political centre remains significantly stronger than the political fringes.

The situation is serious. But is it hopeless? Certainly not. Across almost all of Europe, the political centre remains significantly stronger than the political fringes – and in Germany, almost twice as strong. Moreover, even if the holy grail for successfully countering right-wing (and left-wing) populist movements has yet to be found, it is still possible to identify some promising approaches.

Striking similarities emerge upon examining Greece and Spain, for example – two European countries in which centre-right parties have recently been relatively successful in elections and have clearly outpaced competitors on the far right. Both Greece's Nea Dimokratia and Spain's Partido Popular seek to shape politics confidently from the centre. Neither party defines itself primarily through differentiation from or alignment with the far right; rather, both make a conscious effort to engage as little as possible with far-right competitors and to focus instead on their own programmatic identity and problem-solving capacity. At times, this can mean deliberately ignoring populists on the far right without ceding key issues such as illegal migration.

Another approach that urgently deserves a central place in the political debate is the regulation of social media. Alongside the printing press, the advent of radio and television, and the invention of the World Wide Web, the rise of social media is one of the great transformations that have not only

radically expanded access to the public sphere and accelerated the spread of knowledge and opinion, but also destabilised established structures of power and authority. Such transformations cannot occur without profound consequences, particularly in liberal democracies, where public discourse forms the nervous system of society. Regulatory measures such as the Digital Services Act adopted at the European level and restrictions to social media access for children and young people are therefore steps in the right direction, but they still fall far short of what is needed.

To get a sense of how algorithms increasingly dictate political discourse, it is worth looking at a recent Bertelsmann Foundation study on power dynamics in social media.[8] The study reveals significant distortions that cause almost two-thirds of all political content seen by young people on social media to originate from the political fringes, with almost 40 per cent coming from the AfD. One of the problematic aspects of social media is that it is almost impossible for outsiders to determine how these distortions come into being. All the more reason to push for greater transparency and regulation in this area. Otherwise, one might ask why different rules – or none at all – should apply on social media while political advertising elsewhere is strictly regulated and every second of airtime on television is counted in order to ensure a level playing field, for example.

Ultimately, however, what is needed more than anything else are political solutions that address the challenges that drive voters towards populists on the right (and left). This begins with solutions to the migration issue – something that lies at the heart of many debates. But it does not end there. Indeed, it is a recurring fallacy to claim that centre-right parties are playing the populists' game when they take up "their issues". In fact, the opposite is true: If parties of the centre leave those issues that concern the public to right-wing populists, this itself contributes significantly to the outcomes we are witnessing across Europe and beyond.

This situation does not mean that centre-right parties should model themselves on right-wing populists or adopt their framing and language. Instead, centre-right parties only have a chance of being successful in the future if they address the concerns of potential supporters while preserving a clear line of distinction from the populists to the right.

– translated from German –

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