Right-wing Populism and the European Union

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Abstract

Since its inception the European Union has transformed itself from a mere economic partnership to a regional cooperation, supposedly, embodying laws and values 'universally' accepted as 'good'. This very character has encouraged the EU to pursue the role of a global actor that not only personifies this 'value-system' but also strives at disseminating them into the rest of the world. But, over the years the rise of right-wing populism throughout Europe has threatened to challenge some of the core orientating aspects of this 'value-system'. While electoral victories have demonstrated their ability to impact the character of the EU within its boundaries, this study wonders what impact the rise of the right-wing populism could have on the European Union as a global actor.

Key words: Far-right, Right wing populism, European Union, Global Actor, Foreign Policy

Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, Europe embarked on a landmark initiative in peace building through regional integration and cooperation that ultimately led to the creation of the European Union. Involved in a plethora of political, economic, environmental and social issues, it is safe to say today that the EU often articulates its specific stance based on a particular framework of basic values. These values include the notions of freedom,

equality, justice and human rights and any EU action on the international stage is seen as a means of promulgating these principles globally. Ironically though, within the Union, several right-wing political movements have gained popularity and have the potential of undermining these values within the boundaries of the European Union. In this study I intend to contrast the growing right-wing populism within the various member states of the EU and the officially ratified and recognized values of the European Union. Having done so, I analyze the possible impact of these domestic changes on the character of the Union as an international actor.

The EU as an Actor: Framework of Values

To establish a theoretical frame of the European Union as an international actor based on its core values, it would be important to classify this analysis into two categories, namely, domestic values and values of the EU as an international actor.

Values of the EU as a Domestic Actor

The Maastricht Treaty or the Treaty of the European Union, often termed as the "best known and most controversial of the European treaties",[1] effectively established the EU and therefore its principles can been seen as being at the core of it. Article F of the Title I: 'Common Provisions',[2] and Article K.2 of Title VI: 'Provisions on Cooperation in the Fields of Justice and Home Affairs'[3] in reference to the provisions of Article K.1 (Annex. 1) demonstrate the commitment of the EU to the universal values of human rights, freedom, liberty and democracy within its borders.

At a domestic level, the initial moral and value-based groundwork laid by some of the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty, was further elaborated on by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. At the very outset, the Charter's principles declares that the EU is "…founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law."[4] These supposedly "common values"[5] are further articulated by the charter under the general provisions of 'Dignity', 'Freedoms', 'Equality', 'Solidarity', 'Citizens' Rights' and 'Justice'.

Values of the EU as an International Actor

Within the Maastricht Treaty, one of the provisions of Article 130u of the Title XVII: 'Development Cooperation'[6] and Article J.1 of Title V: 'Provisions on a Common Foreign and Security Policy'[7] establish the notions of human rights, fundamental freedoms and human rights as central to the foreign policy of the European Union.

Further establishing the significance of the EU as international actor, based on the 'common' values, the European Commission claims that the "The European Union believes that democracy and human rights are universal values that should be vigorously promoted around the world."[8] The Commission, in relation to the developing world, further noted that in order to ensure sustainable peace and development policy-making should hold central the notions of "human rights, the rule of law and inclusive democracy."[9] Promoting these values, five objectives (Annex 2) have been adopted by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) for the period between 2007 and 2010.

Having thus established the principles of the EU both as a domestic actor and as an international actor, it is critical to evaluate the correlation between these two value-systems. Comparing them, it could safely be said that the universal principles that form the basis of the 'common values' of the EU domestically, further manifest themselves in the role of the EU as an international actor. The provision set by the Maastricht Treaty and Charter of Fundamental Rights are seen as universally good and therefore provide not only an ideological framework but also a justification for EU action in relation to the developing world. Furthermore, it is seen that the consolidation of these values within the borders of the European Union, will only further legitimize the Union's role as an international actor.

The correlation (between the domestic and the international arena) is clearly framed in the 2007 European Commission External Relations report titled "The European Union: Furthering Human Rights and Democracy Across the Globe." Before, elaborating on the role of the EU externally as a promoter of human rights and democracy, the report clearly establishes Europe and the European Union's long-standing commitment to the instillation of these principles at home. From the English Magna Carta (1215) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789) to the more recent

adoption of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950), the establishment of The European Court of Human Rights and the earlier-mentioned Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,[10] all suggest the institutionalization of European efforts within its borders. Based on these treaties and institutions, therefore "liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law…[become the] founding principles of the European Union and an indispensable prerequisite for the Union's legitimacy."[11] This notion of legitimacy is therefore what enables the EU to propagate the same values. What it brings us is the concept of "ethical power Europe (EPE)."[12] Aggestam sees it as a transition in "EU's role and aspirations from what it 'is' to what it 'does': from simply representing a 'power of attraction' and a positive role model to proactively working to changing the world in the direction of its vision of the 'global common good'".[13] Javier Solana[14] recognized this correlation in Autumn 2007 when he claimed, "The peaceful unification of our continent have been our great achievement, and now our main challenge is to act as a credible force of good. From a continental agenda, we should move to a global agenda. From building peace in Europe to being a peace-builder in the world."[15] His view was further supported by Article 10-A[16] of the Lisbon Treaty, which demonstrates this transition in the role and character of the EU.

Growing Right-wing Populism in Europe

Over the last decade right-wing populist movements have grown in popularity in several EU member states, this demonstrating the potential to contradict the above-mentioned assumptions about European societies. BBC in its 2002 analysis of this noted that while "[m]ainstream political leaders still hope that the far-right-wing movement will subside…the signs are that it has moved from the fringes of European politics towards the center…."[17]

Eight years since and this analysis seems all the more prevalent. In October, 2009, *The European Union Times* quoted Oszkar Molnar, Hungarian Member of Parliament proclaiming, "I love Hungary, I love Hungarian people, and I prefer Hungarian interests to global financial capital, or Jewish capital, if you like, which wants to devour the whole world, but especially, Hungary."[18] The article (dramatically) titled "Hungarian Fidesz

Eyes 2010 Elections: Gypsies, Jews, Homosexuals Beware" further quoted Molnar having "…claimed as fact that pregnant Roma women take medication to give birth to 'fools to receive higher family subsidies. I have checked this and its true; they hit their bellies with a rubber hammer so that they'll give birth to handicapped kids."[19] Another parliamentarian from the party, Ilona Ekes reportedly "…wrote a letter to the police and held a press conference in an attempt to ban a gay pride event in Budapest…saying that homosexuality was a mental illness and demonstrators would frighten people."[20] While these viewpoints cannot be seen as representing the stance of the party as a whole, its very existence within the auspices of a (supposedly) centre-right party was alarming to many observers.

In 2010, *Fidezs* won the Hungarian Parliamentary Elections by winning over 50% of the votes. While this was indicative of a negative trend, it was the success of the far-right party, *Jobbik* that proved far more disturbing, especially for the country's national minorities. The party won 16.67% of the votes. A major Hungarian Jewish organization "…warned that the vote was 'the first occasion that a movement pursuing openly anti-Semitic policies' has taken a step to power since the Nazi era."[21] While *Jobbik*'s popularity can be attributed to it scapegoating the country's Jew's and Gypsies for its dire economic plight, it is its close association with the banned *Magyar Garda* (Hungarian Guard) a banned paramilitary group that is suspected of a "…series of Roma killings in 2008 and 2009…."[22]

While dramatic rise *Fidesz* and *Jobbik* in Hungary is the most recent instance of landmark electoral gains made by the 'right', similar trends have been witnessed throughout the Europe. In 2008, Austria's early elections saw far-right entities, namely, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party) and *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* (Alliance for the Future of Austria), together won 29% of the votes based primarily on rhetoric centered on "…anti-European Union sentiment, some anti-immigrant positions and a general sense of discontent with the two traditional centrist parties."[23] In the 2010 President Elections the Freedom Party fairly poorly with 15.6%, although"…the office of president is largely ceremonial."[24]

Italy's *Lega Nord* or Northern League has represented the rise of the far-right in the southern European country. With "policies such as authorizing coastguards to shoot

human traffickers and the belief that the EU is run by pedophiles"[25] the League has graduated to becoming the "Kingmaker of Italian politics."[26] In the country's 2008 snap general elections the Northern League entered into a ruling coalition with Silvio Berlusconi's *Popolo della Liberta* or The People of Freedom even though this move was highly criticized by European leaders. In 2009, Northern League mayor Franco Claretti of Coccaglio spearheaded Operation 'White Christmas' geared at "…ethnic cleansing…the town…[through]…an officially-sanctioned drive to identify and expel as many non-Europeans as possible before Christmas."[27] *The Independent* reported that the 'Operation' would "…see officials calling at the homes of all 400 or so of the town's extracomunitari – as foreigners from outside the EU are known in Italy -...in order to scrutinize their papers."[28] In the 2010 regional elections the Northern League increased its voting share from 5.7% in 2005 to 12.7%. James Walston of American University of Rome told *The Telegraph*,

> The League has done very well and they will be flexing their muscles for the remaining three years of government. They will push for further devolution and immigration and race will also be on top of their agenda and these two are issues, which are of concern to many Italians. The League is very well organized and they have succeeded in taking a lot of the working class vote from the Communists and Democratic Left and they also appear to have taken votes from Berlusconi's own party.[29]

The *Front National* or National Front in France led by Jean-Marie Le Pen has continued to maintain a significant niche in the French electorate. Its popularity reached its peak in the 2002 presidential elections where Le Pen secured the second highest number of votes. In 2007 elections the National Front share was reduced from approximately 17% to 10.44%. In the French National Assembly elections the Front reached its peak in 1986 securing 35 seats. Currently the party has no seats in the Assembly.

Vlaams Blok or Flemish Block had made significant inroads into the mainstream of the Belgian political mainstream like its counterparts in the rest of the European Union. Operating at the center of the EU, its political stance was said to be "…fiercely anti-immigrant, openly anti-Semitic and advocates Flemish self-rule."[30] In 2003 Anke Vandermeersch, VB candidate told the BBC, "We still are very much against the

multicultural society. We need people who emigrate here to adapt. If they don't adapt to our systems, to our laws, to our values, they should go back to where they came from."[31] In 2004 the party won 23% in the European elections and 24% in the Flemish poll.[32] Later in the year the country's High Court declared that the party was racist. This meant that the "…Blok…[lost]…access to state funding and access to television…"[33] With these restrictions in place *Vlaams Blok* was disbanded and led to the creation of *Vlaams Belang* or Flemish Interest. In its official website *Belang* articulates its political stance as follows,

> Vlaams Belang wants a fair and strict immigration policy: Flemish people have the right to protect their own language and culture. The laws and values of the host country have to be respected. We advocate a firm policy against crime. We regard the traditional family as the cornerstone of society. But above all, Vlaams Belang fights for an independent Flemish state within the European Union. Independence is the best way to secure the future and prosperity of Flanders.[34]

In the 2007 general elections the party won 17 of 150 seats in the Chamber of Representatives and 5 of 40 seats in the Senate.

The far-right in the Netherlands has been led by Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom. Wilders rose to popularity in 2008 with his movie on Islam, *Fitna* that portrays the religion as inherently violent and regressive. According to him "Islam is not a religion, its an ideology…the ideology of a retarded culture."[35] He also likened the Koran to Hitler's *Mein Kamf* and is campaigning for it to be "…outlawed in Holland, the constitution rewritten to make that possible, all immigration from Muslim countries halted, Muslim immigrants paid to leave and all Muslim 'criminals' stripped of Dutch citizenship and deported 'back where they came from'."[36] He further asserts, "I have a problem with Islamic tradition, culture, ideology. Not with Muslim people."[37] Although Wilders currently faces trial "…on charges of inciting discrimination and hatred"[38] him and his party's (*Partij voor de Vrijheid* or Party for Freedom) popularity continues to grow. In the municipal election in Almere in 2010 the party won the most seats, "…although it failed to form a governing coalition."[39] In The Hague it came second behind the *Partij van de Arbeid* (Dutch Labor Party).[40] In the run up to the general

elections to be held in June, 2010, it is expected that Wilders and his party "…may dominate the political scene."[41] It currently holds 9 out of 150 seats in the House of Representatives.

The Bulgarian *ATAKA* political party has also seen steady rise in popularity. It claims to aim at giving "…Bulgaria back to the Bulgarians"[42] by purging Government offices of national minorities, namely, Turks and Gypsies. In the 2005 Parliamentary elections it secured 21 out of 240 seats, which it maintained in the 2009 elections. In Slovakia the far-right *Slovenska narodna strana* (Slovak National Party) took the third highest share of votes in 2006 parliamentary elections and currently holds 20 out of 150 seats.

While these electoral results demonstrate a steady growth in far-right's popularity, this was confirmed at a pan-European level by the results the European Parliament elections in 2009. Significant gains were seen in Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*; 2 seats), Belgium (*Vlaams Belang*; 2 seats), Bulgaria (*ATAKA*; 2 seats), Denmark (*Dansk Folkeparti*; 2 seats), France (*Front National*; 3 seats), Greece (*Laïkós Orthódoxos Synagermós*; 2 seats), Hungary (*Jobbik*; 3 seats), Italy (*Lega Nord*; 9 seats), Netherlands (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*; 4 seats), Romania (*Partidul România Mare*; 3 seats), Slovakia (*Slovenska narodna strana*; 1 seat), and United Kingdom (British National Party; 2 seats).

Analyzing this phenomenon across Europe, in a European Commission research report, the growing popularity of right-wing movements was attributed to the changing socio-economic face of European societies. The report further claimed, that in response to "a world where traditional institutions no longer provide orientation, views…[the extreme right, through,] views and concepts based on ethnicity, anti-elite sentiments or in-group/out-group distinctions may fill the gap."[43] One of the key elements of changing face of European society is immigration. BBC analysis of the right-wing *phenomenon* in Europe notes that the "stopping, or reversing [of] immigration"[44] as a key element of ideological framework. Along with this the recent global economic slump further provides a incentive to adhere to the right-wing values. Richard J. Evans, in "As Europe slumps, is the far Right rising?" claims that "what drives the radical politicians of the new Right is, in the first place, hostility to immigrants, a feeling that is likely to get worse as

the European economy slides into recession. Added to this are fears of the collapse of law and order. The rhetoric of fascism provides a handy symbol for the far Right's determination to deal firmly with immigrants and criminals."[45] The commission research report also states that "right-wing populism and extremism can also be driven by economic consideration — globalization as a challenge to national economy leads to a call for a strong authoritarian government improving the competitiveness at international level."[46]

With the economic and social transformations providing the conditions for the growth of right-wing populism in Europe has also seen collaborations based ideological commonalities. One of the most prominent manifestations of this has been the Euronat created in 2005 as a cooperation of far-right political parties from France, Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Spain and UK. One of the key principles of this association is "No Third world immigration."[47] Another similar cooperation in 2008 called Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty (ITS) was seen among "Far-right MEPs…in the European Parliament, getting enough members…entitling them to EU funds."[48] It included "seven French MEPs (National Front), five Romanian MEPs (Romania Mare), three Flemish MEPs (Vlaams Belang), two Italian MEPs (Lista Mussolini and Fiamma Tricolore), and one MEP each from Bulgaria (Attack), Austria and the UK (both independents)."[49] The group collapsed on November 14th, 2007 within ten months of its creation amid tensions between the Romanian and Italian contingents over the issue of immigration.[50] While this was hailed as positive development and demonstrated the weakness of this kind of transnational cooperation among far-right parties, it also reveals their supranational aspirations.

These aspirations were once again confirmed after the success of far-right parties in the 2009 in European Parliament elections. On July 1, 2009, Europe of Freedom and Democracy was launched. Members included right and far-right entities from Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

Conclusion: Right Populism and the EU as an International Actor
What we have therefore seen in this study is a unique dichotomy of the European Union.

It has established official values ingrained in the institutional make-up and assumes them to be consistent throughout member state societies. Based on this, as earlier demonstrated, the EU assumes a sense of credibility and legitimacy based on which it (attempts) propagates these *universally* good values globally. What we thus see is that assumptions about the prevalent value-system within its borders are what forms the moral context and basis of the EU as an international actor. Since the basis of this correlation is a delicate balance between the domestic and the international sphere for EU, the prevalence and growing popularity of the far-right movements could have two profound effects. First, based on the "elements of racism, xenophobia, authoritarianism and nationalism…"[51] that is often ingrained in ideology of far-right parties, the growing popularity inherently demonstrates the prevalence of these elements within a society. Furthermore, "while right-wing populists are rightly presented as a threat to representative democracy, the reasons for their success can partly be found in undemocratic conditions of contemporary European societies at local, regional and national levels…"[52] What this therefore suggests is that the growing right-wing populism can be seen as corresponding to the erosion of the universal values of the EU within its borders. This, because of the correlation (between the domestic and international sphere) thus inherently comprises the legitimacy of the EU to act internationally based on notion of morals and values.

The second effect concerns itself with the possibility of the far-right parties affecting the European Union institutionally. We earlier assessed that the changing socio-economic face of European societies provides for the ideal breeding grounds for the right-populism. Now, if the support for these movements grow to significant national levels[53] and it has members or is party of the national government there is the possibility of them being represented in the European Commission.[54] Similarly, the European Parliament, since popularly elected could potentially represent the far-right if popularity of these groups grows within member-state societies. Therefore, in the long run, uninhibited growth of right-wing populism could change the very character of the EU as an institution and therefore compromise its value-based role as an international actor.

Thus, what we have here are two scenarios. While both attempt the estimate the possible effect of a continuous growth of right-wing populism on the European Union as

an international, demonstrate this at two different levels, namely, societal and institutional. As societal changes compromise the moral basis for the EU to act globally based on its values of human rights and democracy, the institutional effects would inherently change the very character of the European Union as entity and therefore the manner in which it operates in the international. While these may seem unreasonable assumptions, what they inherently do is demonstrate the importance of a systematic discourse on right-wing populism. While they seem benign today, they hold the potential to the change the very essence of the European Union and therefore demand a greater academic dialogue on the subject.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1[55]

Article K.1

For the purposes of achieving the objectives of the Union, in particular the free movement of persons, and without prejudice to the powers of the European Community, Member States shall regard the following areas as matters of common interest:

1. Asylum policy;

2. Rules governing the crossing by persons of the external borders of the Member States and the exercise of controls thereon;

3. Immigration policy and policy regarding nationals of third countries:

(a) Conditions of entry and movement by nationals of third countries on the territory of Member States;

(b) Conditions of residence by nationals of third countries on the territory of Member States, including family reunion and access to employment;

(c) combating unauthorized immigration, residence and work by nationals of third countries on the territory of Member States;

4. combating drug addiction in so far as this is not covered by 7 to 9;

5. combating fraud on an international scale in so far as this is not covered by 7 to 9;

6. judicial cooperation in civil matters;

7. judicial cooperation in criminal matters;

8. customs cooperation;

9. Police cooperation for the purposes of preventing and combating terrorism, unlawful drug trafficking and other serious forms of international crime, including if necessary certain aspects of customs cooperation, in connection with the organization of a Union-wide system for exchanging information within a European Police Office (Europol).

ANNEX 2[56]

1) Enhancing respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in countries and regions where they are most at risk;

2) Strengthening the role of civil society in promoting human rights and democratic reform, in supporting the peaceful conciliation of group interests and in consolidating political participation and representation;

3) Supporting actions on human rights and democracy issues in areas covered by EU Guidelines, including on human rights dialogues, on human rights defenders, on the death penalty, on torture, and on children and armed conflict;

4) Supporting and strengthening the international and regional framework for the protection of human rights, justice, the rule of law and the promotion of democracy;

5) Building confidence in and enhancing the reliability and transparency of democratic electoral processes, in particular through election observation

NOTES

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[1] "Maastricht Treaty" *BBC Online* 30 April 2001. www.bbc.co.uk

[2] "The Union shall respect fundamental rights, as guaranteed by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms signed in Rome on 4 November 1950 and as they result from the constitutional traditions common to the Member States, as general principles of Community law" ("Treaty on European Union" *Official Journal of the European Communities C 191* (29 July, 1992))

[3] "The matters referred to in Article K.1 shall be dealt with in compliance with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 4 November 1950 and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951 and having regard to the protection afforded by Member States to persons persecuted on political grounds" ("Treaty on European Union")

[4] "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union" *Official Journal of the European Communities* (2000/C): 8

[5] "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union", 8

[6] Title XVII: 'Development Cooperation' – Article 130u: "contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms" ("Treaty on European Union")

[7] Title V: 'Provisions on a Common Foreign and Security Policy' - Article J.1: "…develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" ("Treaty on European Union")

[8] "Europe's commitment to universal values" European Commission (EuropeAid) 18 June 2008. http://ec.europa.eu

[9] "Europe's commitment to universal values"

[10] European Commission. "Furthering Human Rights and Democracy Across The Globe" (2007):6

[11] "Furthering Human Rights and Democracy Across The Globe", 6

[12] Aggestam, Lisbeth. "Introduction: ethical power Europe?" *International Affairs* 84.1 (2008): 1

[13] Aggestam, 1

[14] Francisco Javier Solana de Madariaga was the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union (EU) and the Western European Union (WEU)

[15] Aggestam, 1

[16] Article 10A: The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of

human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law" (European Commission, "Treaty of Lisbon" (3 December 2007))

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[43] European Commission. "Socio-economic change, individual reactions and the appeal of the extreme right" *EU Research on Social Sciences and Humanities* (September 2004): 68

[44] Horsley. "Analysis: Right-wing take Center Stage"

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[46] "Socio-economic change, individual reactions and the appeal of the extreme right", 59

[47] "EuroNat Manifesto" EuroNat. www.nd.se/euronat

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[49] "Far-right group formed in European Parliament"

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[51] "Socio-economic change, individual reactions and the appeal of the extreme right", 59

[52] *Ibid*, 59

[53] Based on the democratic process, it would also mean the mass support of these far-right values at the societal level.

[54] Members of the European Commission are nominated by member-state governments.

[55] "Treaty on European Union"

[56] "Europe's commitment to universal values"