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Europe's Far Right Goes Mainstream: The Failure of Multiculturalism?

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"Are you having trouble with a Central and Eastern European? Or did you lose your job because of a Pole, Bulgarian, Romanian or other Central and Eastern European? If so, we'd like to hear about it."

So begins the controversial [website](#) of the Dutch Party for Freedom, a populist, far-right party led by [Geert Wilders](#). In the few short weeks since this website went live in February, it has attracted the complaints of more than 46,000 Dutchmen and women, eager to voice their grievances about the foreigners they believe deserve the boot. By tapping into his compatriots' latent prejudices, Wilders has succeeded in making his party the second most popular in the country and has all but taken the Dutch political system hostage.

It is no secret that the economic downturn has breathed new life into far-right forces. Whether in the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, France, or the United States, political and economic instability

have provided a window of opportunity for xenophobic, anti-minority hate groups to feed on the fears of the disenfranchised. The problem is particularly acute across continental Europe, where far-right xenophobia is no longer a platform perpetuated by a fringe minority, but is an increasingly vocal part of the prevailing discourse. Indeed, in European countries large and small alike, far-right parties are winning votes, entering parliaments, and in some cases, forming governments. As they do so, their platforms and policies are going mainstream.

What explains the far right's resurgence throughout Europe and should we be worried? This essay argues that we should. While the growing appeal of the far right has sounded alarms all across Europe, too little attention has been paid to understanding why Europe so consistently struggles with hate-based politics. Despite the perceived failures of multiculturalism, Europe should do more to understand why xenophobia remains so compelling and why its immigrants continue to struggle to become European.

The Dutch Conundrum

Far-right extremism has long been a problem throughout Europe. For decades, politicians have struggled to quell the siren songs of extremists within their midst. Their success has often been punctuated by horrific acts of cruelty, the examples of which are far too numerous for comfort.¹ Yet if violence is the most heinous manner in which Europe's far-right extremists have made their presence known, it is not the most conspicuous. All across Europe, far-right policies and platforms—once taboo—are becoming part of the political mainstream. Nowhere more so than in continental Europe, where far-right parties are not simply winning adherents—they're winning power. The parliaments of 14 of the EU's 27 member states now include a right-wing populist party.² And far-right parties are either in government or supporting minority government coalitions in Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

The mainstreaming of the far-right agenda is perhaps most perplexing in the Netherlands. In a country that for centuries was heralded as a beacon of political and religious tolerance, anti-immigrant rhetoric and Islamophobia have become integral to national discourse. Building off of a precedent set by the late [Pim Fortuyn](#), [Geert Wilders](#)—a man who has compared the Koran with *Mein Kampf*—has successfully given voice to the fears and prejudices of his fellow countryman, making the once unacceptable all too acceptable.

Today, Wilders' Party for Freedom has 24 seats in parliament, close to triple what it had in 2006. According to analysts, the party is on course to become the second largest in Dutch parliament when elections are next held. Already, the Party for Freedom is arguably the most powerful in the Netherlands—providing a critical lifeline for a fragile minority coalition government led by [Mark Rutte](#).

Perhaps the most damning indication of the Netherlands' far-right surge is the "deafening silence" with which the Rutte government has greeted Wilders' anti-immigrant website. The website, known in the Netherlands as the "Polish Reporting Point," encourages Dutchmen to identify fellow Europeans—and Poles in particular—whom they believe are causing "nuisance, pollution, job losses on the labor market, and integration and housing problems." Wilders promises to relay those complaints to the Dutch Ministry of Social Welfare and Employment, ensuring that they receive an adequate response from the government.

Not surprisingly, the site has been internationally condemned as "deplorable" and "discriminatory," and has set off a wave of criticism within the European Parliament. Yet it has won virtually no

criticism from the Dutch government. Its silence stems not only from the government's dependence on Wilders, but also from the strong support his anti-immigrant platform has generated. According to [Kemal Rijken](#), a Dutch journalist, the website has tapped into a widely shared sentiment among many Dutchmen that immigrants "take advantage of our society—our roads, our social services, our housing."³

Indeed, the website has won the approval of a large minority in the Netherlands—estimated at roughly 35 percent. Already, tens of thousands of people have registered their complaints. According to Rijken, the website seems in fact to have bolstered the electoral prospects of the Party for Freedom, encouraging parties like the Dutch Socialists to beef up their rhetoric against immigration.⁴

Yet Wilders' far-right agenda has not stopped there. At his insistence, the Dutch parliament is not merely condoning anti-immigrant rhetoric; it may well cement it within national legislation. The country's parliament is currently gearing up to pass a provocative law popularly known as the "Burqa Ban," which would ban facial coverings including the full-length burqa, the niqab (the face-covering veil) and ski masks. At a time when the Dutch government is struggling to rein in debt and the very future of the Welfare State lies at stake, Dutch politicians have thus opted to prioritize the criminalization of the 150 or so women who dare to wear the burqa. As Rijken laments, "the tolerance story" for which Holland once stood is now "long gone."

Catering to the Right Across Europe

Of course, the Netherlands is not the only European country in which the policies and rhetoric advanced by the far-right have won new credence. In France, the adoption of a "nationalistic tone" has enabled the once ailing President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) to advance in the polls. Portraying France as a country with "too many foreigners," Sarkozy has promised to halve the number of foreign residents should he win re-election.

For many, Sarkozy's sudden turn rightwards has been interpreted as a necessary, albeit unsavory, response to the newfound success of [Marine Le Pen's](#) National Front. The new leader of France's infamous far-right party has succeeded in attracting new followers throughout France's working and rural communities by scapegoating migrants. Yet Sarkozy's recent venture rightwards builds on a telling legacy of far-right policies, which includes not only France's 2011 ban on the burqa and niqab, but also 2010's mass [expulsion](#) of the country's Roma population. Indeed, it was policies such as these that prompted the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to warn of a "significant resurgence" of racism and xenophobia across France.

A similar dynamic is at work in Austria. Like the National Front, the Freedom Party of Austria has succeeded in tapping into the fears and concerns of Austria's working and rural classes. Though in 2008 the party won just 18 percent of the national vote, today analysts say it may have the support of almost [one in three](#) Austrians. The Freedom Party of Austria has rebranded itself as a champion of globalization's losers, with its anti-immigrant platform serving as just one part of a larger narrative bent on restoring Austria to an earlier era. According to Freedom Party's leader [Heinz-Christian Strache](#), "A culture war is raging in our country, and we are leading the debate."

Many other European states are witnessing a similar trend. By adopting the mantle of populism, far-right parties are shedding some of their most extremist rhetoric and capitalizing on the racism and insecurity that is taking the continent by storm. In so doing, these once peripheral parties are driving European politics to the right, calling into question the very integrity of the European Project and the

desirability of a multicultural Europe.

Explaining the Far Right's Success

"Utterly Failed." These are the stinging words with which German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) described her country's postwar experiment with multiculturalism. Yet they may be just as easily applied across the European Union. Despite their mantra of "strength in diversity," EU member states have met more adversity than success in their efforts to promote a "multikulti" Europe.

What explains this failure? Why, despite their lofty ambitions to celebrate cultural differences, do Europeans continue to be swayed by anti-immigrant platforms? Why should even the Netherlands—a country internationally renowned for tolerance—fall susceptible to the lure of right-wing extremists?

The answers are, of course, numerous. But perhaps the most prominent is that of economic insecurity. Analysts argue that the economic downturn—which has hit Europe particularly hard—has prompted millions of Europeans to look for someone to blame. All too often, the culprit is identified not as a faceless financial system or outsized debt, but as "outsiders." Immigrants are blamed for stealing jobs and contributing to the welfare state's decline—taking advantage of the resources generations of Europeans have worked to achieve.

Yet however compelling, the recession alone does not tell the whole story. After all, xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric has been gaining ground throughout the continent for well over a decade. In the Netherlands, for example, Pim Fortuyn's anti-Muslim rhetoric made his party a national sensation in 2002—well before Europe's economic malaise.

In part because of this, many European analysts and politicians have laid the blame not on the economy, but on immigrants themselves. Migrants—whether Eastern Europeans or Middle Easterners—have been blamed for their failure to assimilate or acculturate to their new home states. Rather than accept the norms and values of their adopted home, they stand accused of erecting "parallel societies" that allow them to side-step the ethos of their neighbors.

In the Netherlands, for example, Pim Fortuyn accused Holland's Muslim migrants of importing sexual intolerance and forcing homophobia on Dutch society. Today, Fortuyn's successor Geert Wilders is lodging a similar accusation against Poles—who he claims are importing societal ills like alcoholism and crime. And in Austria, far-right leader Heinz-Christian Strache [complains](#) that, "More than 50 percent of Turkish immigrants don't want to integrate into Austrian society. They don't want to learn the language and organize parallel and opposing structures. The activities of radical Islamists have become visible in our society. They hinder its peaceful and democratic development."

It is accusations such as these that encouraged Chancellor Merkel of Germany, President Sarkozy of France, and Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) of the U.K. to declare the demise of Europe's multicultural experiment. For each of these leaders, the notion that incoming migrants will simply adapt to the local culture and customs has proven illusory. Future immigrants, they believe, will have to do more to adapt to their adopted home states—even if this means giving up some of the cherished norms to which they are accustomed. Until this occurs, xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric will continue to appeal to significant numbers of Europeans.

There may well be some truth to such claims. Learning the language of one's new society seems, in many respects, a reasonable expectation and will no doubt benefit both migrants and their new home states. Prejudices like homophobia and sexism are, indeed, antithetical to European values,

and should not be tolerated. Many have also argued that the burqa simply cannot be accommodated in an open society, where facial recognition forms the foundations of trust, and is integral for basic civil services like, say, identification cards.

But do Europe's migrants deserve all of the blame? Or might Europe's problems lie embedded within Europe itself? Perhaps a partial answer lies in the nation states of Europe—old and new—which continue to define themselves along ethnic lines.

Unlike the United States—where you can become an American in a matter of years—a European identity stretches back generations. Whereas in the United States being American is as much an idea as it is a passport, in Europe, being European is a matter of birthright; it is the very blood that courses through one's veins. Indeed, try though one might, it is virtually impossible to become a Dutchman, a Frenchman, or a German. You are born European—it is exceedingly difficult to become European, regardless of your citizenship. This is a major challenge for immigrants in Europe, for no matter how hard they try, they will always remain the Turk, the Moroccan, or the Pole, and they will also be associated with the stereotypes—good and bad—that come with it.

The Dutch term "allochtoon" is perhaps most emblematic of this. At its most basic, "allochtoon" refers to immigrants and their descendants—anyone whose ancestors originate from another country. You may thus be a Dutch citizen, born in the Netherlands, with a parent born in Holland, yet you remain an "allochtoon"—an outsider.

Not surprisingly, the concept of "allochtoon" feeds easily into the "us" versus "them" rhetorical strategy that far-right politicians thrive on. Unless Europeans succeed in embracing a European identity that is inclusive and malleable—where what Europeans share, and not simply how Europeans differ, is celebrated—Europe will continue to fall prey to a hate-based politics.

Should We Care?

The allure of Europe's far right is by no means new. Xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric have long abounded across the European continent. And in many respects, the concerns Europeans have about immigration are well founded. Ultimately, being opposed to immigration is not, in and of itself, antithetical to a pluralistic society. Anti-immigrant platforms are in fact found in many polities—including that of the United States.

Yet the mainstreaming of far-right policies and parties throughout Europe is deeply troubling. That is because these platforms are not simply anti-immigration, but because they are anti-immigrant. They feed on a hate-based politics that encourages stereotypes, racism, and perpetuates notions of "otherness," which are antithetical to a pluralist society.

The demonization of immigrants is, moreover, particularly troubling in Europe, precisely because Europe is so in need of migrants. All across Europe, birth rates are falling and populations are graying. If current birth rates continue, by 2050 close to one in three Europeans will be 65 or older.⁵ In such an environment, immigrants are not a luxury—they are a necessity.

What's more, Europe also depends on trade with the very communities that the far right demonizes. Hate-based politics risk putting trade partnerships in jeopardy. In the Dutch case, both Romania and Poland have threatened to boycott Dutch imports should Wilder's anti-immigrant website remain on the web. As the members of the European Parliament, [Sebastian Valentin Bodu](#) and [Jacek Saryusz-Wolski](#), have warned, "If the Dutch do not want us, we do not want their products." A trade war is the

last thing Europe needs amidst a recession.

Yet the mainstreaming of Europe's far right is most troubling given the continent's frightful history of hate-based violence. Less than 70 years after the Holocaust, it is deeply unsettling to witness Roma communities expelled, young children shipped across borders and Roma settlements destroyed. It is unnerving to know that Dutchmen and women are being encouraged to name and shame fellow Europeans guilty only of being immigrants. Europe can and must do better. Because if it doesn't, there is all too real a possibility that history will go repeated.

NOTES

¹ Just this month, for example, four people were murdered, and another wounded, at a Jewish school in France in what is widely believed to be a hate crime. In December, two Senegalese street vendors were shot by a member of Italy's far-right extremist group, CasaPound. Last summer, Anders Behring Breivik of Norway gunned down 69 Labor Party members. Just weeks later, a pregnant Egyptian pharmacist was bludgeoned to death by a right-wing extremist in Dresden, Germany.

² This number is larger if one includes EU candidate countries, as well as other European states that are not in the EU, including Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden.

³ Authors' interview, 12 March 2012.

⁴ The Socialist Party leader Emile Roemer said that he fully understood the sentiment behind the Freedom Party's website.

⁵ Kevin Kinsella and Victoria A. Velkoff, *An Aging World: 2001*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Series P95/01-1, 2001, p. 9.