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No one-trick ponies: the multifaceted appeal of the populist radical right

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by Stijn van Kessel

The environment for populist radical right (PRR) parties in Europe is favourable. Both the refugee crisis as well as the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels have ostensibly fuelled further xenophobic and anti-Islam sentiments among European publics, on the basis of which PRR parties have been shown to build their support. Recent elections in Europe have indeed seen good results for parties with an outspoken xenophobic message, the victories in March 2016 for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the German regional elections and two far right parties (SNS and L'SNS) in the Slovak national elections being cases in point. Opinion polls in countries such as France and the Netherlands look equally promising for PRR parties. Even though not all European countries have witnessed the successful mobilisation of the PRR, it is fair to conclude that this party family is going strong. It would be too quick to conclude, however, that PRR parties only thrive on the recent salience of the immigration issue.

The PRR's cultural agenda

Immigration certainly forms an important issue for PRR parties, which, according to Cas Mudde, share an ideological core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Besides their belief in a strictly ordered society with clear norms and lines of authority, and their populist anti-establishment criticism, which entails a positive valorisation of the (ordinary) people and a negative portrayal of the 'elites', the PRR's most defining characteristic is nativism. Mudde defines this concept as 'an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state'. Nativism naturally correlates with hostility towards immigrants, who are inherently non-natives. While anti-immigration rhetoric was before mainly voiced by PRR parties in the Western part of the continent, the recent refugee crisis has also made immigration a more salient issue in Central and Eastern European countries. Previously, relatively few (non-Western) immigrants chose to settle in post-communist countries, and PRR parties in this part of Europe mainly targeted minority populations, such as the Roma. More recently, immigration has also become an electoral theme in the post-communist context – with hostile language not only being voiced by the PRR, but also by dominant 'mainstream' party figureheads, such as Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, and Prime Ministers Victor Orban in Hungary and Robert Fico in Slovakia.

The 'supply' of anti-immigration positions by political actors meets a 'demand' from citizens across Europe. Public opposition to immigration and related anxieties about the decay of national culture – not least due to the alleged 'Islamisation' of European societies – lie at the basis of PRR party support. Scholarly contributions have shown that PRR supporters are primarily motivated by the parties' stances on 'cultural' issues, not least immigration and multiculturalism. Socio-economic issues such as welfare redistribution and market regulation, it has been argued, are secondary to the programmes of PRR parties, as well as the concerns of their voters. What is more, PRR parties ostensibly have little to gain from placing more emphasis on their socio-economic programme, as their electorates typically constitute a coalition between lower educated 'blue-collar' workers and petit bourgeois entrepreneurs, two groups with contrasting economic interests and attitudes. Instead, it has been suggested that it makes sense for these parties to devote little attention to, and even 'blur', their positions on socio-economic matters.

Beyond immigration: Europe and welfare

It would be inaccurate, however, to portray PRR parties as single-issue 'anti-immigration' parties. For one, most of them are also characterised by their opposition to European integration. This position is also related to the PRR's nativism: European integration is associated with a loss of national identity and sovereignty. The EU is generally portrayed as an undemocratic 'super state' that threatens the native community, and facilitates unwanted immigration. In addition, the PRR formulates populist arguments against the EU: European integration is considered an elitist project with little regard for the 'popular will', while the EU's decision-making procedures are complex and opaque. In addition, the recent Eurocrisis has provided PRR parties with further ammunition against 'Europe'. For instance, various PRR parties in Northern Europe, such as the AfD, the True Finns (PS) and the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), have voiced opposition against the bailouts for troubled Eurozone members and the pooling of more sovereignty to the European level as a response to the crisis. While Euroscepticism is not the prerogative of the PRR party family only – the radical left, for one, laments the EU's neoliberal character – and although degrees of opposition vary across individual cases, an anti-EU position can be seen as a defining characteristic of contemporary PRR parties.

Further, even though the prevailing consensus is that PRR parties are mainly characterised by their cultural agenda, there is an increasing body of scholarly research showing that (Western European) PRR parties are converging around, what has been called, a 'welfare chauvinist' position. This basically entails supporting economic redistribution and the preservation of welfare state entitlements, whereby the non-natives (most notably: immigrants) are excluded from, or only have limited access to, welfare provision. This implies that the PRR is not necessarily 'right-wing' where socio-economic issues are concerned; indeed, they may support traditionally 'leftist' causes such as the safeguarding of pensions and workers' rights. PRR parties' conception of the welfare provision is hardly universal, however, and the exclusion from welfare provision of non-natives, who are often portrayed as underserving scroungers, is typically argued to be a precondition for the survival of the welfare state.

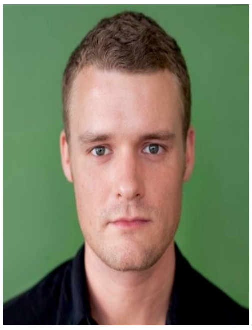
The identification of welfare chauvinist appeals among PRR parties represents a departure from a few influential scholarly accounts from the 1990s. Notably, Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony McGann initially spoke of an ideological 'winning formula' for the radical right in Western Europe, which entailed a combination of neo-liberalism with authoritarianism and xenophobia. It is still something of a moot point whether such early accounts were off the mark as far as the socio-economic programme of the radical right is concerned, or whether the adoption of more 'leftist' welfare protectionist positions by PRR parties is a relatively recent trend. For at least a number of cases, such as the French Front National, the latter interpretation appears valid. It is, in any case, worthwhile to note that this debate centres primarily on the Western part of the continent, as many PRR parties in post-communist countries were from the outset geared at defending the social rights of the 'transition losers', citizens who did not benefit from the transition to the free-market economy.

Where culture meets economy

Whether a new phenomenon or not, does the welfare chauvinist appeal of the PRR signify that the socio-economic agenda of this party family is (becoming) more relevant than previously assumed? On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the economic and welfare policies of the PRR are primarily informed by their cultural agenda. Ostensibly, the most important aim for these parties is to protect the natives, and the economic policies they advocate can be seen as merely instrumental in order to achieve this. On the other hand, however, it seems that current scholarship is too preoccupied with the analytical distinction between cultural and economic dimensions of political competition. It is difficult, and arguably misguided, to interpret the welfare chauvinism of the PRR in *either* economic *or* cultural terms; economic interest and identity are not so easily distinguishable as scholars often suggest. The desired exclusion of immigrants from entitlements may be based on identity, but welfare redistribution inherently remains an economic issue as well. In the same way, it seems too simplistic to attribute the success of PRR parties only to their electorates' fears about the loss of culture and identity, or anxieties about Islamic extremism. Citizens do not necessarily perceive cultural and material threats as clearly distinct, and resistance to immigration is partly borne out of fears of economic competition and welfare deprivation. In fact, the agenda of exclusive solidarity promoted by the PRR is likely to be so electorally potent, exactly because it taps into an amalgamation of cultural and economic concerns found among a significant share of the electorate.

Conclusion

It is clear that, in light of current events, immigration is now primarily framed as a cultural and security issue. This no doubt plays into the hands of the PRR, since this is how parties of this kind like to discuss the theme. This does not mean, however, that the support for PRR parties automatically drops when the salience of other issues increases, or when immigration is associated more with economic bread-and-butter issues. The agenda of the PRR is about more than cultural anxieties alone.



Stijn van Kessel is Lecturer in Politics at Loughborough University. His

current research mainly focuses on populism in Europe and radical right party discourse. He is the author of the monograph Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent? (Palgrave Macmillan).

Tags: anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, nativism, PRR

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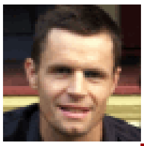
-  Dart-Throwing Chimp
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