

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

# The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States

A Comparative Perspective

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- Right-wing populism across Europe and the United States takes different forms depending on nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture, but there are similarities. Populism's central and permanent narrative is the juxtaposition of a (corrupt) »political class,« »elite,« or »establishment,« and »the people,« as whose sole authentic voice the populist party bills itself.
- Right-wing populism adds a second antagonism of »us versus them.« Based on a definition of the people as culturally homogenous, right-wing populists juxtapose its identity and common interests, with are considered to be based on common sense, with the identity and interests of »others,« usually minorities such as migrants, which are supposedly favored by the (corrupt) elites. Right-wing populists are not necessarily extremists, and extremists are not necessarily populists. The latter, however, is very likely, as extremism lends itself to populism. The more ethno-centric the conception of the people, the more xenophobic the positioning against »the other,« and the clearer the desire to overthrow the democratic system of governance, the more likely it is that a right-wing populist party is also extremist.
- Right-wing populists also strategically and tactically use negativity in political communication. Supposed »political correctness« and dominant discourses are at the same time the declared enemies of right-wing populists and their greatest friends. They allow the staging of calculated provocations and scandals, and of the breaking of supposed taboos. As this resonates with the needs of the media in terms of market demands and the news cycle, right-wing populist receive a lot of free media.



## 1. Introduction

Despite the populist rhetoric against a »political class« unresponsive to »the people,« the recent program convention of the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) was tightly managed by an obvious party establishment which seemed preoccupied with the question of whether to envision participation in governing coalitions or to focus on continued political opposition. In fact, this question of government vs. opposition is not trivial for right-wing populist political parties, at least in Western Europe, if history is any guide. Participation in actual government prevents right-wing populists from using their most important storyline of a political elite governing the country against the political will of the people, and of themselves as political outsiders speaking for a »silent majority.« In Austria and the Netherlands, e.g., disenchantment with the populists in government followed from the need to move beyond their favorite issue areas (immigration, identity, sovereignty) and to move from »simple, common sense solutions« to bargaining and compromise. Alas, inviting right-wing populists to form governing coalitions is not a sure way to stem their success and it has only been temporarily successful in Western Europe, as can be seen by the FPÖ's recent performance in the first round of Austrian presidential elections (35.3% of the vote), which at the same time showcased the fundamental crisis of the traditional conservative and social democratic parties. In Eastern Europe, where party loyalties have been slow to form after the end of Soviet communism, right-wing populist parties PiS and Fidesz govern Poland and Hungary, respectively, with increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

Before discussing strategies that could be employed against right-wing populism, I will first briefly address the question of what defines populism and right-wing populism. After an equally brief history of the recent rise of right-wing populism, I will discuss similarities and differences in terms of the issues right-wing populist parties address, their support in the respective populations, the reasons thereof, and the strategies they use, across a selected group of European countries and the United States.

The agrarian Populist (or People's) Party in the 1890s in the US is at the origin of what we call populism today. The party challenged the established two party system with its critique of the moneyed interests and ended

up merging with, and somewhat transforming, the Democratic Party. While the Democrats moved to the left, however, the US experienced a period of Republican dominance. Henceforth, many observers considered the US almost to be immune to populist challenges because the two major parties seemed capable to absorb them. The current experience of intra-party populism, embodied by the Tea Party movement and Donald Trump in the Republican party, and to a certain extent by Bernie Sanders in the Democratic party, puts this proposition to the test.

But what exactly is populism? And what distinguishes right-wing populism? While many parties sometimes use appeals to the people or claim to represent general interests versus the interests of a specific group, the occasional use of these strategies does not make a party populist. These strategies are often called populist simply to denounce them but are better described as opportunistic. At the same time, a consistent ideology or program is not the most important factor for a populist party's essence or for its success. In terms of political positions (on most issues), populist parties are more flexible than programmatic parties. Populism's central and permanent narrative is the juxtaposition of a (corrupt) »political class,« »elite,« or »establishment,« and »the people,« as whose sole authentic voice the populist party bills itself. Populists thus favor instruments of direct democracy.

Right-wing populism adds a second antagonism of »us versus them« to this constellation as well as a specific style of political communication. Firstly, based on a definition of the people as culturally homogenous, right-wing populists juxtapose its identity and common interests, with are considered to be based on common sense, with the identity and interests of »others,« usually minorities such as migrants, which are supposedly favored by the (corrupt) elites. Secondly, right-wing populists strategically and tactically use negativity in political communication. Tools range from the calculated break of supposed taboos and disrespect of formal and informal rules (e.g., »political correctness«) to emotional appeals and personal insults. Conspiracy theories and biologist or violent metaphors have a place. In line with the anti-pluralism of its conception of the people, right-wing populists refuse the give and take of political compromise and demand radical solutions (concerning their core issues).

While right-wing and left-wing populism can be distinguished, the concept of »populism« is not a useful category when trying to measure the extent of the radicalism or extremism of a political party or movement. That is to say that radical and extremist parties can all be populist. In fact, their political ideologies lend themselves to populism. This is clearly not the case for mainstream, catch-all parties. They are too diverse in terms of their support base, too pluralist in their political debate, they complex and rational in terms of the policies they propose – which is why it often backfires when they try the »simple solutions« of populism: it is not credible. While the essence of populism thus is not political ideology, it is more than a simply a style of politics: Populism is a particular style of politics that is intricately related to particular political ideologies.

Why then talk about »right-wing populism« and not radicalism or extremism? Today, in light of the Euro-crisis and the arrival of refugees, populism is working for right-wing radical and extremist parties, and mainstream parties have not been able to develop strategies to effectively counter this populism.

## 2. The recent rise of right-wing populism

Right-wing populists are not necessarily extremists, and extremists are not necessarily populists. The latter, however, is very likely, as extremism lends itself to populism. The more ethno-centric the conception of the people, the more xenophobic the positioning against »the other,« and the clearer the desire to overthrow democratic governance, the more likely it is that a right-wing populist party is also extremist. The extremism of many right-wing populist parties, but also their programmatic flexibility, is evident across Europe.

### 2.1 Right-wing populism in Europe

Under its longtime president, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the Front National for decades had a right-wing extremist message with anti-Semitic elements. Support came largely from among the middle classes, from small businessmen and farmers, due to (neo-)liberal economic positions bordering on social Darwinism. The FN had some electoral success, e.g. at elections to the European Parliament and

in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections. The party's current president, Le Pen's daughter Marine Le Pen, has worked towards a »de-demonization« of the party in order to broaden its base. This »normalization« has not only entailed the ousting of the party's longtime leader and his more radical followers but also a shift from antisemitism to an anti-immigrant, islamophobic position and a shift from economic liberalism to a policy of protection of the French people against globalization. Anti-EU nationalism and anti-elitism are mainstays of the FN's program. Its growing base of support has shifted towards the (»white«) working class and unemployed. The FN is now established as France's third strongest political party and only »Republican« alliances prevented it from gaining seats in the second round of regional elections in 2015. Marine Le Pen is widely expected to advance to the second round of the next presidential election.

Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), founded in 1955, is also an example for right-wing populists' extremism as well as for their programmatic flexibility. Until 1980, former national-socialists played important roles. Subsequently, the FPÖ governed as junior-partner in a grand coalition with Austria's social democrats until, in 1986, Jörg Haider won the FPÖ's leadership. Haider, charismatic and provocative chairman until 2000, moved the party back towards the right, and broadened its base to include working class voters with an increasingly anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim message. Pan-German nationalism and the playing down of national-socialism characterized the FPÖ's message. The FPÖ was the second strongest party in the 1999 elections and governed as junior partner of Austria's conservative party ÖVP until 2006. The contradiction of this governing role with its anti-elitist message weakened the party considerably for a time, leading to internal debates and splits. Under the leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache, the FPÖ recovered from participation in the governing coalition and is polling at around 20 %, using instruments of direct democracy to promote their anti-EU and anti-immigrant agenda. In the first round of presidential elections in 2016, the FPÖ's candidate, Norbert Hofer, gained a plurality of the vote (35.3 %) while the candidates of the conservative and social democratic parties which have dominated Austrian politics since the end of the war performed miserably.

In light of the absence of stable party systems in Eastern Europe, right-wing populist parties have seen wildly changing levels of support, bringing them from

governing roles to the brink of extinction and back. The current governments of Poland and Hungary demonstrate that a governing role will not necessarily discredit right-wing populist parties. In Poland, the ultra-nationalist, anti-pluralist Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS), founded in 2001 by the twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, has benefitted from a combination of agrarian traditions, the strength of Catholicism, decades of authoritarianism, as well as disaffection with democracy and the EU and the resulting low voter turnout. In the PiS conception, the Polish people are considered to be homogenous and catholic. Radio Maryja provides symbolic support of this confluence of Catholicism and Polish identity. The »common people« are juxtaposed against a »liberal, cosmopolitan elite« ready to sell out the country to foreign interests. Despite this thinly veiled antisemitism, PiS is not generally considered extremist but national conservative, however, the PiS government, in office since 2015, is moving towards illiberal authoritarianism. It no longer recognizes the rulings of the constitutional court, and has weakened the media. »The people's interests supersede the law,« one minister remarked.

In Hungary, the governing party Fidesz began moving towards illiberal authoritarianism in 2010. The governing coalition under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán adopted a new constitution and restricted the freedom of the media. Fidesz, founded in 1988, is yet another example of right-wing populist party's flexibility. It started as a mainstream liberal alliance and moved to the right only after electoral failures. Today, Fidesz can be considered a national conservative populist party, favoring interventionist economic policies. Its concept of the Hungarian nation is threatening to neighboring countries because it includes their citizens of Hungarian descent. Fidesz has begun to change the nature of the country's political system, in part by adopting policies from the platform of the right-wing extremist party Jobbik. This is particularly problematic for the Roma minority. In the context of the current influx of refugees to the European Union, the Orbán government has increased its anti-EU and anti-immigrant rhetoric, thereby halting and reversing a slip in the polls.

In Western Europe, there are several new right-wing populist actors who have begun to change the political landscapes and who, while in opposition and with limited electoral support, have influenced sitting governments' policies. In the United Kingdom, the UK independence

Party (UKIP), founded in 1993, has been consistent in its anti-EU and anti-immigration message and is now profiting from changed public opinion. Under the leadership Nigel Farage, UKIP saw first successes at the elections for the European parliament and has performed well nationally since 2011. While considered to be part of the radical right by some observers, they have been able to distance themselves from the extremist British National Party by highlighting their (economic) libertarianism and their inclusive concept of a British nation. Nevertheless, the current influx of refugees to the European Union has highlighted UKIP's skepticism regarding immigration. UKIP's greatest impact has been on the policies of the current conservative government which, in the face of UKIP's popularity, has resisted allowing refugees to the UK and scheduled a referendum about a possible exit from the EU.

For a long time after World War II, many observers thought Germany to be almost immune to successful right-wing extremism and populism, at least at the national level, and outside of particular situations of protest, because of the crimes of national-socialism and the conservative party's ability to integrate national conservatives and to occasionally cater to populist sentiments. An influx of asylum-seekers in the early 1990s brought xenophobic sentiments to the fore, especially in East Germany. Subsequently, right-wing extremist parties and networks developed strongholds there. The Alternative für Deutschland, AfD, was established in 2013 as a reaction to the Euro crisis and in protest of the EU's bailout policies. Renegades from (neo-)liberal Free Democratic party and from the Christian Democratic party (CDU), who felt that their party had moved too far to the center, found a new home in the AfD, but from the beginning there was also a more extreme anti-immigrant element. Demonstrations against the immigration policy of the current grand coalition government, namely the Pegida movement, caused an undercurrent of change in AfD's membership and electoral support and the founding leadership around Bernd Lucke, an economics professor, was ousted in 2015. Under the new leadership of Frauke Petry, the AfD has increased its right-wing populist message, adopting much of the Pegida language of »anti-establishment,« »anti-Islam,« anti-media and anti-immigration, in addition to the traditional Euro-skepticism. They embrace methods of direct democracy to challenge the »political class« which is supposedly selling out the interests of the German people by purposefully allowing mass-migration

to compensate for low German birthrates (a conspiracy theory originating in France: »le grand remplacement«). National conservatives like Alexander Gauland want the country to return to a (fictionalized) situation of peaceful, stable West Germany and to traditional gender roles. The AfD has already affected government policy. Electoral success in European, local and Länder elections – after a brief dip in the polls after the ousting of Lucke – has been formidable and the established parties have not found a way to steal the AfD's thunder, neither by downplaying or marginalizing them nor by accommodating some of their demands.

## 2.2 The peculiar case of the United States: Trumpism and the Tea Party

The American two party system with its winner-take all elections has been mostly immune to third party challenges, at least since today's Republican party replaced the Whig Party in the 1860s. The Populist Party of the 1890s was absorbed into the Democratic Party. The historian Richard Hofstadter compared third party challenges to bees: once they have stung (the system), they quickly die. Still, as Donald Trump secures the Republican nomination for president, right-wing populism has taken hold of the US as well. Intra-party populism is not a new phenomenon; in fact, the Republican party has for decades more or less embraced tenets of the »us versus them« narrative: Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy successfully exploited the racism of southern whites, after Barry Goldwater tried and failed. Ronald Reagan demonized African-American welfare recipients to win northern suburban voters. George H.W. Bush did the same with African-American convicts, always playing on racist sentiments of white voters, and his son George W. Bush used people's unease with gay marriage to win the 2004 election. This political opportunism did not make the Republican Party a populist party, however, first the rise of the rank and file Tea Party movement, embittered with the Obama presidency, alleged bail-outs of African-American and Latino debtors, the national debt, Obamacare, and the Republican establishment, and now the presumptive presidential nomination of Donald Trump, have profoundly changed the American political landscape in a populist fashion.<sup>1</sup>

1. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's hate group count, the number of hate groups in the US increased sharply after Barack Obama's election.

The Republican establishment which has condoned the use of racism, nativism, demonization of the opponent, in the past, is now merely hypocritical when professing to be »shocked« by statements of Donald Trump about wanting to deport eleven million »illegal« immigrants, to close US borders to all Muslims, and to build a wall on the US-Mexican border (for which Mexico would have to pay) to keep out once and for all »Mexican rapists and murderers.« By the same token, both the Republican and – to a lesser extent – the Democratic party are responsible for the transformation of American politics into a polarized battlefield. They have adopted policies that have made the life of many of the people who now support Trump, namely parts of the white (male) working class, increasingly difficult. Trump's promises of easy solutions to complex problems, without any need for compromise or negotiation, are quite obviously only workable in a fantasy world, but they are appealing to a highly disaffected section of the American public, as are his constant challenges of the supposedly hegemonic »political correctness.« Former secretary of labor Robert Reich may go too far (for now) when he calls Donald Trump an »American fascist« but Trump does not simply have charisma, simple solutions, (and money), he has condoned the use of violence in politics, he operates a movement outside of political institutions, and he detests and evades independent media.

## 3. Similarities and Differences

Right-wing populism across Europe and the United States does not come with uniform, clearly defined characteristics; it takes different forms depending on nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture. At the same time, there are similarities.

### 3.1 Issues

Clearly, right-wing populist parties, movements, and candidates across Europe and the United States have identified widespread discontent concerning a range of political, economic, and cultural issues. These issues right-wing populists capitalize upon are largely the same across all countries but they are obvious national specificities.

The opposition to globalization, for example, is uniform when it comes to immigration but differs in terms of

degree and target. Trump's proposals to deport all »illegal« immigrants and to prevent all Muslims from entering the US might simply have been campaign rhetoric (many observers have analyzed in detail why his plans are infeasible) but they are a far cry from the relatively careful distinction between different groups of immigrants in the AfD platform (first and foremost with respect to EU citizens) and the tentative acceptance of a Canada-style immigration policy.

The same holds true for considerations of international trade and finance. While the defense of »the people« against competition is clearly the defining principle, right-wing populists in Eastern Europe (and for different reasons in the UK) are more fundamental in their opposition of the EU than the AfD, which strictly opposes bail-out policies but at the same time recognizes the value of the EU (and even the Euro) for the export-oriented German economy. Trump and the Tea Party in the US do attack the EU but as far as their supporters are concerned, opposition to free trade agreements such as the TPP and TTIP is the much more salient issue.

For right-wing populists, immigration is not simply a question of economic competition but it constitutes a threat against the presumed (constructed) identity of the people and their traditional values. Again, the principle of »othering,« of constructing and highlighting an antagonism of »us versus them,« is uniformly applied by right-wing populists, but the definition of »the other« varies pursuant to nationally specific conditions. In Hungary, one target is therefore the Roma minority, while the Tea Party and Trump highlight Mexicans and other immigrants from Latin America. Islamophobia (much more prominently than antisemitism) characterizes right-wing populists' positions regarding the immigration (and integration) of Muslims everywhere, but in the United States it is informed less by the current influx of refugees than by the threat of terrorism.

Similarly, disaffection with the establishment – the other, fundamental construction of »us vs. them« – is a uniform feature of right-wing populism across Europe and the United States but it takes different, nationally specific forms. Also, of necessity, it takes different forms depending on the political position of a right-wing populist party, i.e. whether it is an opposition or a government party. In Eastern Europe, PiS and Fidesz have continued to attack the post-communist elites of

yesterday as if those still ran the country, but they also have turned their vertical othering to the EU, especially the EU commission in Brussels, and to a certain extent to Germany as the dominant player in Europe today. Most right-wing populists find themselves in opposition roles which makes it much easier to attack the established and supposedly corrupt political elites as well as the media establishment.

### 3.2 Support

There is not enough available data to determine who financially supports right-wing populist parties and whether there are significant differences across Europe and the United States. Donald Trump is the obvious outlier, as his campaign is largely self-financed and as US law requires some transparency regarding campaign donations.

In terms of electoral support, in Western Europe, there are differences in terms of the extent to which right-wing populist parties have been able to hold on to the largely middle class/small business support that characterized many of them in the past when they embraced many (neo-)liberal policies based in part on social Darwinist conceptions of human society. This issue arises most clearly for the older right-wing parties such as the FN and FPÖ but even in the newly established AfD the contradiction between these tenets and the proclaimed protection of »regular folks« against the threats of globalization and modernity is obvious, as much of its program is contrary to the economic interests of large parts of its support base.

Today, the spectrum of support of most right-wing populist parties, as well as the Tea Party and Donald Trump in the US, highlights a blurring of traditional left-right scales in the sense that presumed supporters of left-of-center parties, i.e., working class and unemployed voters, especially men, are embracing right-wing populist messages. For example, while the FN continues to have support among small businessmen and can therefore not fully embrace policies of social protection, it has profited from rising »worker authoritarianism« – i.e. intolerance of minorities and an embrace of national identity – and from the demobilization of left-wing voters in the working class, i.e. the decreasing social integration of workers by unions and left-wing political parties, clearly

associated with the economic changes of globalization. While these voters do not embrace the neo-liberal tenets of FN policies they can support its concept of a »national capitalism« characterized by corporatist arrangements.

In Eastern Europe, the constellation of support for right-wing populists is much more fluid because voters have not been socialized into established party systems. Currently, they mobilize primarily older voters who seek social protection and symbolic policies of patriotism while younger voters tend to embrace the new found freedoms represented by EU membership etc. (or, to the contrary, opt for more radical parties such as Jobbik in Hungary). UKIP's support similarly comes from old, male, working class, white and less educated voters, while Trump, who has clearly mobilized a white, male, non-union electorate, has performed best in counties with incomes below the average.

While working class support of right-wing populism might at this point be more an expression of protest, a political »cry for help,« than of conviction, the specter for left-of-center parties is obvious. Clearly, right-wing populism is not merely a problem for conservative parties (who might in the end even be able to form coalitions with the populists). Voters' economic concerns are legitimate and those sections of the population who worry about social and economic changes and who no longer feel represented by mainstream parties will be difficult to bring back into the fold of social democracy and unionism absent substantial political and economic reform, as well as the effective management of current challenges of integration.

### 3.3 Strategies

Supposed »political correctness« and dominant discourses are at the same time the declared enemies of the right-wing populist and his greatest friends. They allow the staging of calculated provocations and scandals, and of the breaking of supposed taboos. Using plain language, the populist will not hold back against this oppressive media regime and express the wishes of the »silent majority.« Right-wing populists use stark generalizations, including strict distinctions between »us and them,« »friend and foe« etc. Emotional appeals and exaggerations are common in order to create a politics of fear and anger, as are crass simplifications

both of problems and solutions: Common sense will simply dictate how to address any situation; political compromise is unnecessary and weak.

Most political parties and candidates have adapted elements of the theatrical for their political communication (event driven and image-orientated communication, symbolic use of politics). All actors discussed here use the major right-wing populist strategies of political communication, to different degrees and with national-specific variations. These differences are not systematically linked to the various actors, but the national variation as well as differences concerning the effectiveness of the various strategies have rather to do with the different political cultures and media landscapes across Europe and the United States. In general, right-wing populist parties profit from the mechanisms of modern media (even though they make it a point to consider them part of the »corrupt« establishment) because their strategies of political communication resonate with the needs of the media in terms of market demands and the news cycle. Right-wing populist receive a lot of free media attention because of the provocative, emotional and simplified nature of their political communication. This reinforces the effectiveness of their messaging regardless of the tone of the coverage. This effect is most visible in TV because the nature of most relevant TV formats (news shows, talk shows) does not allow for much reflection. In addition, public media give more room for discussion, spend more resources on fact-checking and tend to be less sensationalist and less focused on horse race journalism.

## 4. Reactions and counter strategies

Even the best and most critical journalists, however, tend to have difficulties dealing with right-wing populists because of their ability to fit any criticism or attack into their world view of being marginalized vis-à-vis a »corrupt« political establishment of which the media is simply a part. Investigative or satirical media do better but largely preach to the choir, i.e., they often do not reach an audience of supporters or sympathizers of right-wing populist parties.

The dilemma is even greater for political parties competing with right-wing populists. A strategy of marginalization, practiced in many local, regional, state and sometimes



national legislatures, might keep the right-wing populists from shaping policy, but does nothing to minimize their electoral appeal because in the end it reinforces their image as an outsider fighting for the interests of the people. In turn, consideration of right-wing populists' positions helps them as well by legitimizing their policies and it might change the country profoundly, especially because no compromise is ultimately possible on many issues, e.g. identity issues, and right-wing populists will simply make additional demands.

Preventing the rise of right-wing populists to power might currently be easiest in the US. For now, the peculiarities of the American political system and culture will likely prevent Donald Trump from entering the White House. Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic nominee, not only leads Trump in the polls but Trump's nomination solves her own mobilization problem – many people will not vote for her but against Trump (and presumably many Republicans will stay home) – and in terms of electoral demographics, she simply has more possible ways to a majority in the Electoral College than any Republican nominee and certainly more than Trump. But while populism at the national executive level seems very unlikely at this point, at the legislative level the polarizing, uncompromising strategy of the Tea Party movement and other movement conservatives will surely continue to hinder effective and constructive governance in the Congress and many state legislatures. In fact, if Trump loses this situation might deteriorate in many states.

In parts of Europe, a new political landscape might be developing where the established mainstream parties continue to weaken and have to increasingly rely on grand coalitions to hold right-wing populist parties at bay. This, however, reinforces their message of being outsiders marginalized by an overpowering and corrupt elite.

Political and electoral strategies obviously have limits and especially identity issues, which are at the core of right-wing populist conceptions of the people and of »the other,« are almost impossible to address politically beyond defeating the parties which represent such ideas at the polls. However, in light of the fact that right-wing populist parties have shown that they can at best only be temporarily weakened by participation in governing coalitions (e.g. in Austria) – at worst, they come to dominate the government and transform the country in

an authoritarian and illiberal direction as in Hungary and Poland – it is clear that it will not suffice to keep right-wing populist parties from political power, and strategies like the use of EU sanctions also only partially address the problem. In fact, addressing questions of identity in this sense means challenging the discursive power of right-wing populists, and this can most likely only be achieved by political and civic education, and through debate and struggle in the civil societies of the respective countries – much like it is currently happening in Poland and Hungary.

At the same time, it seems obvious that those voters not ideologically committed to right-wing populist ideas of identity, whose vote might be mostly a vote of protest, have legitimate issues in the face of globalized competition, increasing social inequality etc. Many opportunities have been missed to address these concerns; in fact, in many countries the long reign of neo-liberal policies has contributed to the problem even in times of social democratic governance. Given the national and European electoral cycles, it might even be too late to address the basic problems at the heart of these voters' legitimate discontent before right-wing populists gain even greater representation. Changing the course of unfettered globalization, finding ways to socially and ecologically regulate the global economy while addressing national inequalities and injustices (in the tax system, for example) will take time. In some ways, political and economic trends continue to point in the opposite direction, as the discussions of TPP and TTIP, bonuses for failed CEOs, tax havens and loopholes etc. show.

One of the most difficult questions with respect to feasible strategies against right-wing extremism is whether it is possible to adapt successful strategies across borders. Cross-border learning and the transplantation of successful practices – business, political campaign, cultural – have great appeal and seem almost natural in a globalized world of instantaneous communication and the widespread use of English as a lingua franca. Empirical evidence of ultimately unsustainable cherry picking and of insurmountable barriers to transnational transfers, however, gives rise to caution. Each national context has institutional, historical, and cultural specificities – both in terms of the »opportunity structures« for right-wing populists and for the conditions of success for the combat against them, that cross-border learning remains a difficult proposition.





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