

# CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

## *Immigration and the New European Right*

*John Rosenthal*

There is a specter haunting Europe: the specter of allegedly anti-immigration, Islamophobic parties. From Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands to the resurgent National Front under the leadership of Marine Le Pen in France to the newly founded Freedom Party in Germany, what the mainstream media terms the "extreme right" is on the march all across the old continent. In European political nomenclature, the expression carries a clear connotation of ideological proximity to Nazism. German authorities, for instance, regularly apply the term to outright neo-Nazi groups.

What a surprise, then, to find the National Front's Marine Le Pen picking up support precisely *on the left*. In 2002, her father Jean-Marie caused a sensation by winning nearly seventeen percent of the vote in the first round of France's presidential elections, eliminating the Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin and moving on to a second round run-off against the incumbent Jacques Chirac. Current polling foresees Marine doing even better in the upcoming French presidential elections in 2012.

When, however, Marine Le Pen made her first big breakthrough in the polls in January of this year, it was not only the "moderate" right of

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President Nicolas Sarkozy and his Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) that had cause for alarm. In an internal party memorandum cited in the French press, Socialist Party public opinion analyst François Kalfon concluded that Le Pen was siphoning off support from the traditional working-class electorate of the left.

The January poll by France's CSA public opinion institute showed Le Pen pulling seventeen or eighteen percent in a first round of voting, depending upon the candidate fielded by the Socialists. By early March, polling by Harris Interactive showed her pulling twenty-three to twenty-four percent of the vote and coming out on top in a first round against Nicolas Sarkozy and any of three different Socialist candidates.

When the left-wing daily *Libération* sent a reporter to a mining district in the Pas-de-Calais region to talk with supporters of the National Front (FN), she met one Josette Lecocq, a "retired housewife and FN member." Josette's deceased husband had been a member of the French Communist Party, and she recalled how she used to watch the legendary Communist Party leader Georges Marchais on the television and how "he made me laugh." Now, however, Josette told *Libération*, "Workers should turn to the FN, if they want someone to defend them."

But on closer inspection, the National Front's appeal on the left is in fact not so surprising, after all. In the first place, the conventional European designation of Nazi and Nazi-like movements as "right-wing" has always been an egregious misnomer. The National Socialists were not called National *Socialists* for nothing. From the start, the Nazi Party program made no secret of the party's anti-capitalist fervor and its particular distaste for financial capital (or the "slavery to interest" [*Zinsknechtschaft*], as the party program put it).

Moreover, as German historian Götz Aly has shown in *Hitler's Beneficiaries*, a recent book on the social welfare policies of the Third Reich, once in power the National Socialists largely lived up to their name: both as regards the redistributive largesse of the state and as regards the limitation of the latter to members of the racially defined "national community." In short, supposing that there really are meaningful affinities between the National Front and traditional National Socialism, then we ought precisely to *expect* the FN to be making inroads on the left.

In the second place, those European parties that are typically lumped together nowadays as supposedly xenophobic and Islamophobic exponents of the “extreme right” are in fact a heterogeneous group whose members

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have little in common when it comes to their more general political programs and orientations. Some, like France’s National Front or the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), clearly tack to the left on economic matters and are essentially “leftist” as well in their often virulent anti-Americanism. Not coincidentally, both of the latter parties are long-established representatives of Europe’s, so to say, *old* “new right,” which, despite the confusing nomenclature, has always shared many characteristics with the left.

Other members of the group, like Wilders’s Party for Freedom in Holland, tack to the “right” on economic matters: i.e., they are generally for free markets and free trade. They make a point, moreover, of their *pro*-Americanism. In the standard European sense of the term—as opposed to the unfortunately denatured American one—they are basically *liberal* parties. Indeed, in this sense, they figure among the few genuinely liberal parties remaining in continental Europe.

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Still others are essentially defined by highly specific local politics. This is most obviously the case of Belgium’s Vlaams Belang (“Flemish Interest”), a Flemish separatist party. Vlaams Belang is frequently portrayed by the media as a racist and xenophobic party. But if any “racism” could be said to be integral to its basic political program, then this would have to be, more precisely, anti-*French* racism. The antipathy is in keeping with the

peculiarities of Belgian history: traditionally, the French-speaking “Walloons” have constituted Belgium’s ruling elites. But nowadays Wallonia, the French-speaking south of the country, is one of the poorest regions in Europe and is widely perceived by the Dutch-speaking Flemish in the north as a drag on their own prosperity.

In a 2007 interview with Frank Vanhecke, then the chair of Vlaams Belang, a reporter from the Swiss weekly *Die Weltwoche* mentioned that he had heard party supporters insulting French-speaking Belgians as *franse ratten* (“French rats”). A bemused Vanhecke admitted that this was a traditional taunt among the Flemish, before adding, “I consider these sorts of insult to be not particularly intelligent: they are badly received by the public and they damage our good cause.” Otherwise, Vanhecke spoke mainly about the economic disparities between Belgium’s constituent regions and the unwillingness of the Flemish to continue subsidizing the failed “socialistic” policies of the south.

Among the few things that all these parties do share in common are opposition to political Islam and wariness about what they perceive to be the increasing influence of Islam as such in Europe.

Somewhat unwittingly, Marine Le Pen brought the subject of “Islamization” to the forefront of French politics when in mid-December of 2010 she told a small private meeting of FN supporters in Lyon that the collective prayers of Muslims in public spaces in France constituted a sort of “occupation.” “It’s an occupation of parts of the [national] territory, of neighborhoods where [Islamic] religious law is applied,” Le Pen explained, “Of course, there are no tanks, there are no soldiers. But it is still an occupation and it is a burden for the residents.”

Le Pen’s words were recorded and the recording was provided to the French media, thus drawing condemnation by, as France 3 public television put it, “the entire [French] political class, left and right.” Faced with the uproar, Le Pen gladly embraced her supposedly scandalous remarks. Referring ironically to Sarkozy’s UMP and the Socialist Party (PS) as a single “UMPS,” she responded, “By refusing to condemn the unacceptable behavior of those who are breaking the law, the UMPS and its acolytes are conflating Islam and Islamism and contributing to the legitimate exasperation of the French people.” If the entire political class indeed condemned Le Pen, this appears hardly to have been the case for the public. The CSA poll that first established her credentials as a serious presidential contender was taken barely three weeks later.

The FN has, of course, long made opposition to mass immigration the centerpiece of its political program. Although the party's programmatic texts make reference to questions of "national identity," however, it should be noted that much of its argumentation on this point consists rather of a nuts-and-bolts analysis of the allegedly calamitous fiscal impact of recent immigration in light of the French state's hitherto generous social welfare programs. With France's burgeoning national debt fast approaching equivalence to GDP, there is little doubt that this argumentation strikes a chord with many French people, especially those who find themselves in economic difficulty.

The perception that current immigration is chiefly, so to say, "welfare dependency immigration," rather than traditional labor immigration, has also helped to fuel the rise of Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands. Wilders has famously called for a full stop to immigration from Muslim countries. In his original Dutch-language formulations of this demand, the stop was supposed to be merely temporary—for five years—during which time existing problems of integration were to be addressed. Apparently, Wilders has in the meanwhile decided that those problems are insurmountable. The 2010 electoral program of the Party for Freedom speaks of a "full stop" of Muslim immigration...period. There is no longer any mention of the five years.

For good measure, the PVV program now also calls for the Dutch labor market to be kept closed to Bulgarians and Romanians, and for the reversal of its previous opening to Poles. Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland are all, like the Netherlands, EU member states.

It is well known that Wilders's opposition to specifically Muslim immigration is based on what he views as a fundamental incompatibility between modern Western societies and Islam as such. Wilders describes the latter as a totalitarian political ideology, not a religion. But whether it is a matter of the persecution of homosexuals, the subordination of women or the fusion of state and religion, it is hard to see anything particularly "right-wing" about the reasons he adduces for refusing to accept the introduction of sharia law in Europe.

Like Marine Le Pen in France, moreover, Wilders has also summoned economic arguments to support his calls for an immigration stop. In May 2010, the PVV published a study estimating the annual costs of "non-Western" immigration to the Netherlands to be over seven billion euros

per year. One month later, Wilders and the PVV sent shock waves across Europe when the PVV pulled over fifteen percent of the vote in the Dutch parliamentary elections, thus becoming the third-largest party in the Parliament. The current minority coalition government in the Netherlands depends upon the PVV's support.

But not all of Europe's supposed "anti-immigrant" firebrands are in fact so negative about immigration per se. For instance, Thilo Sarrazin, whom some media have tried to stylize into the "German Geert Wilders," has spoken highly of the accomplishments of East Asian and Eastern European immigrants in Germany, noting that children from both groups typically outperform native Germans academically. He has even praised the American model of immigration, arguing that the integration of all immigrants is more successful in America precisely because the potential for welfare dependency is less.

Sarrazin is a former chief financial officer of the city of Berlin and a former board member of the German Bundesbank. Last year, he was ousted from the Bundesbank and subjected to a sort of ritualized public excommunication by virtually the entirety of the German political class, starting with Chancellor Angela Merkel. The immediate and ostensible source of the opprobrium was a passing remark that Sarrazin had made about Jews and genetics in a newspaper interview, thus prompting vague charges of anti-Semitism. Never mind that, as other of Sarrazin's comments clearly attest, he is, if anything, *philo-Semitic* not anti-Semitic.

But, as the subsequent course of the controversy made obvious, the true source of the opprobrium was Sarrazin's well-known skeptical views on the consequences of Turkish and Arab immigration to Germany. The eruption of the controversy coincided with the publication of Sarrazin's book on the subject, *Deutschland schafft sich ab*, or "Germany is Abolishing Itself." The trumped-up charge of anti-Semitism was presumably concocted in order to help make the charge of "Islamophobia" stick.

It was Sarrazin's public banishment by the established political parties, as well as Wilders's success in the Netherlands, that largely inspired the founding last October of Germany's new "Freedom Party." In keeping with Sarrazin's theses, the party program states that "Numerous immigrants are economically successful and thus as a rule also well-integrated. Gainful

employment plays a central role in all efforts at integration.” Nonetheless, the program calls for a full stop to immigration for all but highly qualified workers. The stop is to remain in place “at least until existing problems of integration have been solved, in particular those tied to immigration

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from traditionally Muslim countries.” The call for a “full-stop” is somewhat odd in light of the fact that the program also recognizes that Germany suffers from a serious problem of labor *emigration*. Indeed, the country’s net immigration balance is negative.

Given their opposition to political Islam, one other point on

which Europe’s new and renovated “new right” parties tend to converge is their support for Israel in its conflict with Hamas, Hezbollah, Ahmadinejad’s Iran, and other vectors of Islamic radicalism in the Middle East. To harmonize this support with the commonplace treatment of these parties as “neo-Nazi” parties requires some vigorous mental gymnastics.

Not surprisingly, actual self-styled neo-Nazi groups in Europe make precisely the opposite choice. Indeed, as a rule such groups view radical Islam as an important ally in their struggle against their enemies of choice: namely, “global Jewry” and “American imperialism.”

For example, in a 2008 statement, a Hamburg-based neo-Nazi group called the North German Action Office criticized a highly publicized “anti-Islamization” initiative sponsored by the organization Pro-Cologne. “Pro-Cologne’s superficial populism against Islam sends a completely wrong signal, about which only pro-Israeli circles could be happy,” the authors complained. Employing the standard jargon of Nazi movements worldwide, the statement continues:

Inasmuch as it is a determined opponent of the western-plutocratic one-world policy, we regard Islam, globally considered, as an ally against the mammonistic dominance of the American east coast.

The freedom of nations is not threatened by Islam, but rather by the imperialism of the USA and its vassals from Jerusalem to Berlin.

In Nazi discourse, the “American east coast” is a common euphemism for Jewish influence.

By contrast, on December 7, 2010, in a highly symbolic step, representatives of four of the reputedly “extreme right” parties here under discussion issued a common programmatic declaration in Jerusalem. The four parties were Germany’s Freedom Party, Belgium’s Flemish Interest, the Swedish Democrats, and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

The most surprising member of the quartet was Austria’s FPÖ. The FPÖ has long maintained ties to postwar revanchist and ethnic German chauvinist circles in Austria. Under the leadership of the late Jörg Haider, it gained international notoriety for flirting with anti-Semitic resentments, and it was certainly no friend of Israel. Haider’s successor, Heinz-Christian Strache, appears to be trying to distance himself from at least part of this legacy. (In the standard English translation, the name of the Austrian “Freedom Party” appears to be identical to that of the new German “Freedom Party.” It should be noted, however, that in the original German the names of the two parties are different. Their programs too are of clearly different inspiration.)

The four parties’ joint “Jerusalem Declaration” notes that “After the overcoming of the totalitarian systems of the 20th century, humanity finds itself today confronted by a new global totalitarian threat: the threat of Islamic fundamentalism.” Specifically on Israel, the declaration continues:

As the only true democracy in the Middle East, Israel is an important dialogue partner for us.... We acknowledge unconditionally the right of Israel to exist within secure and legally-recognized borders. Israel’s right to defend itself against all forms of aggression, in particular against Islamic terror, has also to be accepted.

There is one final point on which all the parties here surveyed agree: namely, on the right to criticize Islam if one so wishes. In the context of a European Union in which so-called “hate speech” laws and other limita-

tions on freedom of speech are not only commonplace, but indeed obligatory, this can by no means be taken for granted. The spectacle of one critic of Islam after another being hauled before the courts and condemned for speech crimes has undoubtedly contributed to public sympathy for the “anti-Islamization” parties.

To take only one recent example, in February of this year, the lecturer Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff was convicted by an Austrian court of “disparagement of a religious doctrine”: namely, Islam. At an FPÖ-sponsored seminar, Sabaditsch-Wolff had said that the Prophet Muhammed “gladly had a little something with children,” implying that he was a pedophile. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammed married his third wife Aisha when she was six and consummated the marriage when she was nine. “I’m of the opinion that the truth must remain the truth, just as it must remain the case that three times three equals nine,” Sabaditsch-Wolff told the court in her closing remarks—before being found guilty and fined 480 euros.

The universal condemnation of the new “anti-Islamization” right by the European political and media establishments has clearly not dampened the enthusiasm of the public. Indeed, it may well have had the opposite effect. It is not only Marine Le Pen who is riding high in the polls. According to the latest Austrian polling data, if national elections were held today the post-Haider FPÖ would win, overtaking the Socialists and the “center-right” Austrian People’s Party to become the country’s main political force.

But the next big test could come in Germany. In September, elections are to be held in the city-state of Berlin. The German Freedom Party intends to use the occasion to field candidates in an election for the first time. A photo on the party website shows the campaign team standing in front of a poster featuring a single slogan written in many languages: “We love freedom.” ●

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