

ISSUE BRIEF

What's Left of Europe If the Far Right Has Its Way?

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The 2008 financial crisis provided an electoral boost to European far-right parties: France's National Front won the European Union (EU) parliamentary elections in 2014, as did the right-wing populist Danish People's Party and Britain's nationalist Euroskeptic UK Independence Party. In Austria, the right-wing populist Freedom Party picked up steam, almost doubling its support from 11 to 21 percent between 2006 and 2013. And in Hungary in 2014, the extremist Jobbik party syphoned votes from the center-right party, Fidesz, to become the second most popular party.

These gains in electoral support, while important, were still incremental. But the European refugee crisis and the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 are bound to change that. These events catapulted the far right's bread-and-butter issues—immigration, national sovereignty, and Euroskepticism—to the mainstream of political discourse.

Once on the fringes of politics, far-right parties, capitalizing on Europe's economic woes and isolationist mood, are fast becoming part and parcel of politics, even in traditionally social democratic countries such as Finland and Sweden. For example, at one moment during the French regional elections in December 2015, it seemed as if the National Front was poised to win in six out of the twelve metropolitan regions in the first round of voting. It took the center left and center right working together to block the far-right populists in the second round of voting. But the National Front's brush with victory may be a harbinger for what is to come in elections across Europe.

With mainstream parties struggling to address growing security threats and fears of an "Islamization of Europe," support for nationalist

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populism, economic isolationism, and demagoguery across the continent is likely to increase. It is especially important to pay attention to developments in Central and Eastern Europe, where the roots of democracy are still relatively shallow, Russian influence is considerable and gaining, and NATO arguably faces its stiffest challenges.¹ Far-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe also tend to be more antidemocratic and extremist than their counterparts in Western Europe.² In these insecure times, these countries stand to lose the most in the event of a far-right populist backlash. But as the electoral success of Jobbik shows, citizens of Europe's youngest democracies are already looking for more radical solutions to the region's challenges.

The Ideal Conditions for Far-Right Resurgence

Prior to the summer of 2015, the turn to the right in Europe was fueled by two interrelated factors. First, the 2008 economic crisis exposed cracks in the EU's ability to manage the negative effects of an economic downturn. As Germany forced Spain and Greece to swallow the bitter austerity pill, and unemployment continued to climb well after the initial shock, the European project started to lose its luster. The economic crisis pushed popular opinion toward Euroskepticism—the second factor boosting the popularity of the far right's anti-EU platforms. Across Europe, citizens began to doubt that European integration—supported and ushered in by centrist parties on the left and the right—was the answer to their discontent. And while legitimate questions do exist about the quality of European integration and the positive economic growth that the EU can continue to deliver to its members, the far right has effectively usurped this issue for its own agenda.

The most successful far-right parties have been strategic: Over the last decade, they shifted from using openly racist and xenophobic rhetoric to promoting

a civic liberal tradition, which they have effectively recast along national lines. In these parties' narratives, the EU has become a threat to national sovereignty, and non-European Muslim immigrants have become scapegoats for the loss of national values and a threat to liberal democratic ideals.³ Paradoxically, far-right parties have styled themselves as defenders of “true” European values against the encroachment of both non-European foreigners and the EU elite in Brussels.

Still, even with the rhetorical softening, the economic downturn and Euroskeptic public opinion alone were not enough to push moderate voters to the extremes. But the refugee crisis of 2015 became the final straw, adding the last ingredient for far-right success.

More than any other recent event, Europe's refugee crisis provides fodder for far-right parties that have been warning against the “Islamization” of Europe.

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With millions of predominantly Muslim refugees fleeing to Europe to escape the war in Syria in 2015—1.1 million registered in Germany alone—the crisis has cast doubt on the sustainability of the Schengen agreement of open borders.⁴ Along with the common market, the Schengen system is a bedrock of EU integration, representing the dream of a borderless Europe.

While the EU Commission pushed for a coordinated approach to secure the Schengen zone borders, calling border security a “collective responsibility,” many EU countries—Germany, Austria, France, Sweden, and Denmark to name a few—have imposed some form of temporary identity checks at their borders.⁵

The far right's long-standing crusade to resurrect “fortress Europe” is quickly becoming reality. As such, the crisis has exposed the center right's pandering to

1 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Is Transition Reversible? The Case of Central Europe”, *Legatum Institute*, January 19, 2016, <http://www.li.com/activities/publications/is-transition-reversible-the-case-of-central-europe>.

2 Alina Polyakova, *The Dark Side of European Integration: Social Foundations and Cultural Determinants of the Rise of Radical Right Movements in Contemporary Europe* (Stuttgart New York: ibidem and Columbia University Press, 2015).

3 Alina Polyakova, “Europe's Failing Dream,” *American Interest*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/09/14/europes-failing-dream/>.

4 Avaneesh Pandey, “Europe's Refugee Crisis: Germany Registered over 1 Million Asylum-Seekers in 2015,” *International Business Times*, January 6, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/europes-refugee-crisis-germany-registered-over-1-million-asylum-seekers-2015-2251590>.

5 James Kanter, “EU Pushes to Take over Border Security at Migrant Crossings,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/europe/eu-borders-migrant-crisis.html>.



Pegida demonstration in Dresden on January 5, 2015. Sign on left reads: "Putin, help us, save us."
Photo credit: Metropolico.org/Flickr.

the far right. Negative public opinion toward refugees has forced European governments, and particularly the center right, to respond or risk losing voters to the far right. By the spring of 2014, before the largest influx of refugees even began, few Europeans wanted to see an increase in flows, while four in ten wanted to see a more restrictive immigration policy, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center.⁶ Central and Eastern European countries, through which many refugees pass on their way to Western Europe, took the most drastic initial measures: Hungary erected a fence along its Serbian border (completed in the fall of 2015) and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán called the refugees' refusal to leave Hungary's train station for refugee camps a "rebellion."⁷ And when the European

Commission proposed a plan for Schengen zone members to accept quotas of refugees, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic joined Hungary in rejecting the plan. Slovenia and Austria then followed Orbán's lead to build their own border fences. Central and Eastern Europe's tough stance puts the region in stark contrast to Germany's willingness to accept refugees.

The triple threat of economic crisis, Euroskeptic attitudes, and mass refugee inflows created a markedly different political reality in Central and Eastern European countries, which have neither the institutional infrastructure nor the cultural experience for integrating migrants. And far-right parties with roots in ultranationalist authoritarian ideology are well-positioned to take up the anti-immigrant agenda and

6 Pew Research Center, "A Fragile Rebound for EU Image on Eve of European Parliament Elections: Chapter 3. Most Support Limiting Immigration," May 12, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/12/chapter-3-most-support-limiting-immigration/>.

7 Daniel Nolan, Roszke, and David Blair, "Hungary Faces 'Rebellion' by Migrants, Says Viktor Orbán," *Telegraph*, September 11,

2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/hungary/11859043/Hungary-faces-rebellion-by-migrants-says-Viktor-Orban.html>.

to push the center right toward a more extremist anti-immigrant isolationist agenda.

The Ideological Roots of the European Far Right

The American sociologist Daniel Bell used the term “radical right” to define the anticommunist ideology of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s.⁸ In the scholarly literature on the European far right, however, the label became associated with a particular type of authoritarian ultranationalism, characteristic of “post-fascist” parties. The post-war liberal-democratic consensus forced the racist and ultranationalist political rhetoric of the fascist old right to the margins of European political discourse. While a significant part of the post-war fascist movement remained faithful to fascist ideology, such groups remained on the periphery.

The far-right parties that then emerged in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the National Front and the Austrian Freedom Party, toned down their authoritarian ultranationalist rhetoric. Nevertheless, these parties remained on the fringes without any real support until the late 1980s. But as Jean-Marie Le Pen, then head of France’s National Front, gained at the polls throughout the 1980s and 1990s—eventually winning 16.86 percent of the vote in the first-round presidential elections in 2002—European scholars took notice of the once-marginal groups.

Hans-Georg Betz, a German political scientist, was one of the first to analyze the rise in support for the far right in the 1990s and identified three drivers of this shift in allegiance: distrust in political institutions among voters, the weakening of electoral alignments along conservative versus liberal lines, and increased political fragmentation in the political party space.⁹ These factors, according to Betz, provided an opportunity for new challenger parties. The most successful early far-right parties combined racist authoritarianism with free-market liberalism—a “winning formula” of sorts that worked well for the National Front in the 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰

By the late 1990s, this winning formula no longer held true. To attract the working class—the traditional constituency of the left—Western Europe’s far-right parties dropped their free market liberal bend in favor of economic protectionism, authoritarianism, and populism, while blaming minorities for unemployment and economic decline.

Today, far-right parties are undergoing another change of face: toning down the racist and overly authoritarian rhetoric as they seek to enter the mainstream.¹¹ For example, the National Front—now under the leadership of Marine Le Pen—has been increasingly moderating its rhetoric and even expelled the founder of the party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, as his extremist statements damaged the new “moderated” image of the party. The far-right Sweden Democrats party is likewise toning down the more extremist elements in its organization in a bid to appear respectable in voters’ eyes. And this strategy is working: the Sweden Democrats may now be the most popular party in power, according to some polls.¹²

Who Votes for the Far Right?

Supporters of the early far-right parties were the so-called “losers of modernization”—people who struggled to adapt to a new post-industrial environment due to lack of skills and a low level of work mobility. This has remained true today: young, working class, or unemployed men continue to be disproportionately represented in the electorate of the far right.¹³

Beyond demographic characteristics, far-right voters hold a distinct set of views that, once considered fringe or radical, are now becoming part of the mainstream. First, some far-right voters are driven by the perceived “non-native” threat to their way of life. Ethnicity, religion, and culture deemed essential for national identity are threatened by non-native others, whether immigrants or indigenous minorities. In the European context, the non-native threat is associated with migrants and refugees from foreign countries,

8 Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right*, Expanded and Updated (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

9 Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

10 Herbert Kitschelt with Anthony J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

11 Anton Shekhovtsov, “How the European Far Right Became Mainstream”, *Politico*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/euroskeptics-far-right-became-mainstream/>.

12 Mattias Albinsson, “All Time High för SD—26,8 Procent i Nyheter Idag/Sentios Opinionsmätning,” *Nyheter Idag*, November 12, 2015, <http://nyheteridag.se/all-time-high-for-sd-268-procent-i-nyheter-idagsentios-opinionsmatning/>.

13 Marcel Lubbers, Merove Gijsberts, and Peer Scheepers, “Extreme Right-Wing Voting in Western Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2002.

particularly from Asia and Africa; representatives of religious minorities, especially Muslims; and LGBT groups. Religious and ethnic identities often overlap in the case of Muslims from the Middle East or Africa, making them prime targets for the far right. This is compounded by the emerging fear of Islamist terrorism following the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015 when 130 people were killed by individuals aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The European integration process and the EU as an institution, with multicultural policies at its core, are interpreted as contributing to or even encouraging the security threat.

Second, the skepticism or even open hostility toward non-natives contributes to and reinforces the perception that European societies are unstable—undermined by austerity measures, economic turmoil, unemployment, social inequality, political corruption, and other troubles. This perception, however, does not necessarily reflect the real economic situation. Since World War II, economic downturns have not directly produced far-right surges in Western or Eastern Europe.¹⁴ It is the *fear*, rather than the *experience*, of rising instability that creates fertile ground for authoritarian solutions. Supporters of far-right parties want a more ordered and controlled society driven by conservative social values, nationalist interests, and economic isolationism.¹⁵

Third, far-right voters see themselves as average men and women, though men are much more likely to vote for far-right parties than women, who feel that mainstream politicians not only fail to represent their needs but deliberately ignore them.¹⁶ Established parties and political elites do not, according to this view, represent the interests of the “common” people. Far-right parties, which turn to “commonsensical” language and criticize the EU elite in Brussels, while

positioning themselves as outsiders in national politics tend to attract voters who feel that the mainstream establishment does not serve their interests.

In this respect, the National Front's loss in the second round of regional elections in 2015 may prove to be a boon for the party, which has worked to define itself as an antiestablishment political force. After losing the elections, Le Pen accused the Socialists and Republicans of conspiring against her party, and argued that there is no difference between the two parties.¹⁷ If the example of Le Pen holds a lesson for Central and Eastern Europe, it is that the response of mainstream parties to the far-right challenge will to a great extent determine how well such parties do at the polls.

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Problems Faced by the Far Right in Central and Eastern Europe

Far-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe had a rocky start in the 1990s. Unlike their Western European counterparts, these parties had to define themselves in opposition to the legacy of authoritarian state socialism. This legacy muddled the traditional left-right political spectrum, as both far-right and successor communist parties advocating for law and order competed for the same voters.¹⁸ Adding more ideological confusion, communist and far-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe often found themselves on the same side when it came to isolationist economic platforms and expansionist social policies, making them strange bedfellows. For example, communist parties shared the far right's concern for law and order, strong national government, and sovereignty, which meant the far right was competing for the same voters as the successor communist parties.

As support for successor communist parties began to wane across the region after the early 1990s, far-right parties started to find political openings. Yet, Central and Eastern Europe is not a homogenous region, and

14 Alina Polyakova, “The Backward East? Explaining Differences in Support for Radical Right Parties in Western and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 49–74.

15 Piero Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

16 Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

17 Nicholas Vinocur, “What Le Pen Really Wants,” *Politico*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/what-le-pen-really-wants-front-national/>.

18 Polyakova, “The Backward East?” op. cit.



Jobbik rally in Hejosalonta, Hungary in April 2011. Photo credit: Leigh Phillips/Flickr.

far-right parties have had varying levels of success: initial success followed by rapid decline in countries like Romania and the Czech Republic versus initial struggle followed by rapid electoral rise in Hungary.

While there is no single explanation for why some far-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe fail while others succeed, one thing is clear: the manner in which centrist parties respond to the far-right challenge can have a significant impact on the far right's electoral outcomes. In addition, a far-right party's ability to adapt rhetoric and discourse to exogenous shocks, such as the economic crisis or the refugee crisis, has long-term consequences for that party's ability to attract moderate voters and gain electoral support. To illustrate how these two factors—mainstream parties' responses and the far-

right's adaptation skills—can lead to diverging electoral outcomes, it is worth taking a closer look at two cases: the failure of the Greater Romania Party in Romania and the unparalleled success of Jobbik in Hungary.

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Romania: A Failure for the Far Right

For more than two decades, the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare or PRM), co-founded and led by the recently deceased Corneliu Vadim Tudor, was the main far-right party in Romanian politics. But the party's initial rise in the polls, driven by economic instability and a wave of nationalism sweeping the country after the fall of the Soviet Union, did not last (see table 1). The

party failed to adjust its ultranationalist, racist, and neofascist discourse.

Established in 1991, PRM combined racism and communism, and, until the mid-1990s, could essentially be described as a national-communist party that praised both the wartime pro-Nazi Prime Minister and convicted war criminal Ion Antonescu and the long-time communist leader of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu. Because of these ideological influences, Vladimir Tismăneanu, political scientist and Director of the University of Maryland's Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies, characterized the PRM as "neither left, nor right, but an elusive conglomerate of communist and fascist nostalgias, hostility to modernity and diversity, and a militaristic, phallographic cult of the nation (racially defined), the movement, and the leader."¹⁹

"Greater Romania" in the name of the party refers to the interwar borders of the Kingdom of Romania that existed on the territories of modern Romania, Moldova, and parts of Bulgaria and Ukraine. Greater Romania united the scattered areas of ethnic Romanians, and the PRM aimed to revive a homogeneous ethnic Romanian society at the state level. The party ideologues believed that such a project could not be realized as long as significant ethnic minority communities—Hungarians and Roma, in particular—lived in Romania. According to PRM, these ethnic minority communities were deliberately subverting the Romanian nation. Curiously, however, the PRM was one of the few European far-right parties that supported membership in the EU and did not question membership in NATO.

In 1992, the PRM obtained 3.90 percent of the vote in the first post-communist parliamentary elections and secured twenty-two seats in the parliament. Despite its initially limited electoral success, the PRM became part of the ruling coalition in Romania under social democratic Prime Minister Nicolae Văcăroiu, but it did not participate in the formation of the government. The 1996 parliamentary elections were more successful for the PRM: It garnered 4.46 percent of the votes and twenty-seven seats in the parliament (see table 1). By that time, PRM had moderated its communist rhetoric, but maintained an economic populist ideology that defined politics as a struggle between the ordinary hard-working people and the corrupt elite.

In the 2000 parliamentary elections, PRM obtained 19.48 percent of the vote and secured 126 seats in the parliament, becoming Romania's second-largest party. Moreover, in the presidential election that same year, Tudor received 28.3 percent of the vote and made it to the second round of the election, but lost to Ion Iliescu, former communist and leader of the Social Democratic Party. Tudor's presidential campaign was marked by extreme racist rhetoric directed, in particular, against the Roma minority. As he said during one TV show, "the only reason why [Roma people] do not rape their children and parents is that they are too busy raping ours."²⁰

Table 1. Electoral Support for PRM

Election Year	Percent of Popular Vote	Seats
1992	3.90	22
1996	4.46	27
2000	19.48	126
2004	12.92	45
2008	3.15	0
2012	1.47	0

Source: European Election Database, Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste, http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/.

The rise of the PRM in 2000 was prompted, in part, by dissatisfaction with the rule of the center-right and pro-Western Emil Constantinescu, Romania's President from 1996 to 2000. His presidency was characterized by significant market reforms, particularly in the banking sector, but they were inconsistent and incoherent. His administration's policies eventually resulted in an economic recession. Constantinescu's inability to carry out his reform agenda cost him politically; as PRM rose to power in 2000 on a wave of political disenchantment, Constantinescu chose not to run for reelection and temporarily left political life altogether.

The center-right, pro-Western parties, such as the National Liberal Party and the Democratic Party, suffered dramatically from Constantinescu's unsuccessful rule, and seemed unable to offer any convincing alternative to the social democrats and far right. As Vladimir Tismăneanu argues, "never was the gap between the pro-Western intelligentsia and the

¹⁹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, "Romania's First Post-Communist Decade: From Iliescu to Iliescu," *Wilson Center*, July 7, 2011, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/225-romania-s-first-post-communist-decade-iliescu-to-iliescu>.

²⁰ Gabriel Andreescu, *Right-Wing Extremism in Romania*, Ethnocultural Diversity Resource Center, 2003, p. 32.

electorate so deep as in the fall of 2000. The democratic forces lacked a unity of vision, strategy, and tactics. They appeared disoriented, confused and stuttering.”²¹

The PRM benefited from this disunity of democratic forces only temporarily. The high support for PRM in the 2000 elections served as a wake-up call to the pro-Western democratic camp, which quickly moved to consolidate. The center-right National Liberal Party and the social-democrat Democratic Party, which later turned center right, joined forces and established the Justice and Truth Alliance, a political alliance in opposition to the ruling Social Democratic Party and the PRM. The strategy worked: In the 2004 parliamentary election, PRM's support fell to 12.92 percent, while the Truth and Justice Alliance formed a coalition government and replaced the PRM as the second-largest political force in Romania. The Truth and Justice Alliance's candidate, Traian Băsescu, won the presidency in the same year running on a strong anticommunist and anticorruption platform.

In 2007, Băsescu oversaw Romania's EU accession, which boosted the country's economy and reduced the social grievances that fueled electoral support for the PRM. Despite some public efforts by Tudor to distance himself from the party's anti-Semitic and authoritarian discourse—he wrote a letter in 2004 retracting his earlier anti-Semitic statements and Holocaust denial—PRM failed to rebrand itself.²² By 2008, the PRM, failing to receive sufficient electoral support, was out of the government and by 2012, the party had completely receded into obscurity, winning only 1.47 percent of the popular vote in the parliamentary elections of that year.

PRM's initial rise and eventual fall demonstrates how far-right parties that do not adapt their political discourse can easily fall from grace in the face of a coordinated effort by the center left and center right. As political competition in Romania moved to the center, the center-left and center-right parties reclaimed dominance, and smaller parties on the far left and far right proved unable to contribute to the political discourse. In addition, Romania's EU membership, which brought increased economic and political stability, greatly reduced the attractiveness

of PRM's populist rhetoric. With strong public support for EU integration in Romania in the early 2000s, PRM did not challenge the pro-EU consensus and even failed to exploit the 2008 financial crisis by turning to the Euroskeptic, anti-globalist rhetoric of many other European far-right parties.

Hungary's Jobbik: The Popular New Kid on the Block

In contrast to the PRM's decline into obscurity, the Movement for a Better Hungary, known as Jobbik, has become the most electorally successful far-right party in Central and Eastern Europe. Founded in 2003 and led by the historian Dávid Kovács, Jobbik placed “a blend of ultraconservatism, anticommunism, and anti-globalism at the core of its early agenda.”²³ Its first electoral results were unimpressive: In the 2006 parliamentary elections, Jobbik joined forces with the far-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party, and—as an electoral bloc—they obtained only 2.20 percent of the vote and failed to enter parliament (see table 2).

After the unsuccessful elections, Gábor Vona replaced Dávid Kovács as Chairman of the party. Under Vona's leadership, Jobbik radicalized even further, and began to preach for “a greater Hungary (to its pre-World War I boundaries) and hate against Gypsies, Jews, gays, and other supposedly ‘non-Hungarian’ elements in the country.”²⁴ Furthermore, Vona initiated the creation of the Hungarian Guard, a paramilitary wing of Jobbik that allegedly aimed to keep law and order in areas with large Roma populations. Pushing the anti-minority agenda, Jobbik also introduced the concept “Gypsy crime” into the political discourse in Hungary in order to link criminality with the Roma minority. The tensions between ethnic Hungarians and Roma pushed Jobbik into the limelight, and the Hungarian Guard branded itself as the only organization that could enforce law and order.²⁵ In the 2009 European parliamentary elections, Jobbik obtained 14.77 percent of the vote—a result that was crucial for its subsequent rise in national politics. In the Hungarian parliamentary elections the following year, Jobbik scored 16.67 percent and became the third-largest party in Hungary (see table 2).

23 Andrea Pirro, *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, Impact and Electoral Performance* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 68.

24 Paul Hokenos, “Central Europe's Rightward Slide,” *GlobalPost*, May 30, 2010, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/europe/100415/central-europes-rightward-slide>.

25 Pirro, *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, p. 69, op. cit.

21 Tismăneanu, “Romania's First Post-Communist Decade,” op. cit.

22 Grig Davidovitz, “Vadim Sees the Light,” *Haaretz*, April 4, 2004, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/books/vadim-sees-the-light-1.118835>.

Table 2. Electoral Support for Jobbik

Hungarian Parliamentary Election Year	Percent of popular vote	Seats
2006	2.20	0
2010	16.67	47
2014	20.30	23
European Parliamentary Election Year		
2009	14.77	3
2014	14.67	3

Source: European Election Database, Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste, http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/.

Jobbik's success since 2009 has been driven by the party's ability to consolidate voters' anti-establishment sentiments, rising disenchantment with European integration, and increasing demand for law-and-order policies. Between 2004 and 2009, the years leading up to Jobbik's rise, attitudes in Hungary shifted to the right: The number of Hungarians identifying as far right on the political spectrum increased from 6 to 13 percent.²⁶ At the same time, anti-EU attitudes increased as well: In 2004, one out of ten Hungarians saw EU integration as a bad thing; by 2011, that number rose to more than one in five.²⁷ These trends were buttressed by rising anti-Semitic and anti-Roma attitudes. According to the Anti-Defamation League, a nongovernmental organization tracking anti-Semitic attitudes, two in three Hungarians agreed with the statement that "Jews have too much power in the business world"—the highest level of agreement in the polled countries.²⁸ Jobbik has also rallied against the Roma and its co-optation and exploitation of societal grievances, combined with the effective use of local grassroots mobilization campaigns, helped spring the party into the political limelight.

In the run up to elections in 2014, Jobbik moderated its image and discarded harsh anti-Roma and anti-Semitic rhetoric, embracing instead Euroskeptic populism and

anti-Westernism (especially anti-Americanism), and adopting clearly pro-Russian stances. As a result, Jobbik retained its position as the country's third most popular party by obtaining 20.30 percent of the votes in the parliamentary elections.

The 2014 parliamentary elections and subsequent public opinion polls suggested that Jobbik was picking up voters from Orbán's center-right Fidesz party. Fidesz's loss to Jobbik in a by-election in April 2015, in which Jobbik gained its first-ever individual constituency seat in parliament, was a significant symbolic blow to Fidesz.

In response to Jobbik's incursion on its turf, Fidesz, rather than excluding Jobbik from the political space, adopted an "if you can't beat them, join them" approach. Fidesz has embraced more restrictive policies on immigration and EU integration, and has turned increasingly antidemocratic in its attempt to compete with the challenge from the right. In addition, Fidesz has closely followed how Jobbik's policies are received by voters as a way of testing how policy ideas resonate. For example, in 2010, Jobbik introduced the idea of "Eastern Opening"—the notion that Hungary should look east to countries like Russia, China, India, and Central Asia rather than only to the West for policy inspiration. Quickly afterwards, the Fidesz government engaged in a series of high-level meetings with China, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey. "Eastern Opening" has since become the core foreign policy of Orbán's government.²⁹ This strategy of adaptation and convergence is unlikely to work in the long term to address the underlying concerns driving support

26 Peter Kreko, Krisztian Szabados, and Attila Juhasz, "Reasons Behind the Resurgence of the Far Right in Hungary," *Risk and Forecast*, October 28, 2009, http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/hungary/reasons-behind-the-resurgence-of-the-far-right-in-hungary-_307.html.

27 European Commission, "Eurobarometer Surveys: Eurobarometer Interactive Search System," http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=5&nationID=22,&start-date=2004.10&enddate=2011.05.

28 Kreko, Szabados, and Juhasz, "Reasons Behind the Resurgence of the Far Right in Hungary," op. cit.

29 Political Capital, "Jobbik's Policy Proposals Realized by Fidesz: A Summary in 10 Points," *Risk and Forecast*, May 15, 2015, http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/hungary/jobbik-s-policy-proposals-realized-by-fidesz-a-summary-in-10-points_818.html.



Rally by Bulgarian political party ATAKA at Alexander Nevsky Square in Sofia. Photo credit: Ivan/Wikimedia.

for Jobbik, and it may well backfire on Fidesz if the party goes too far to the extreme and alienates voters, thereby damaging its credibility and legitimizing the extremist views of the far right.³⁰ Jobbik, rather than Fidesz, would be the winner.

Due in part to its ideological predispositions and concern over its decline in popularity, Fidesz chose to radicalize its rhetoric in an attempt to win votes back from Jobbik. For example, in the summer of 2014, Orbán claimed that his party would “build an illiberal nation state;”³¹ the following spring, he introduced the idea of reestablishing the death penalty, which goes against EU principles, and implemented a

criminal policy against migrants.³² The government also initiated “a national consultation” on immigration that implicitly sought to “vilify Hungary’s immigrants, fan xenophobic sentiment, and promote harsh anti-immigrant measures” by linking immigrants to terrorism and crime.³³ Hungary’s move to build fences along its borders with Serbia and Croatia as the refugee crisis was heating up in the fall of 2015, while widely criticized in the media, seemed to accomplish what Orbán likely intended: Opinion polls in September 2015 showed Fidesz leading in popular support.³⁴

30 Matthew Goodwin, *Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe*, Chatham House, 2011, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/r0911_goodwin.pdf.

31 Honor Mahony, “Orbán Wanted to Build an ‘Illiberal State,’” *EU-Observer*, July 28, 2014, <https://euobserver.com/political/125128>

32 “Viktor Orbán Is at Martin Schulz’s Disposal,” *Orbán Viktor Honlapja*, April 29, 2015, http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/viktor_orban_is_at_martin_schulz_s_disposal.

33 Anton Shekhovtsov, “It’s Getting Ugly in Hungary,” *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/20/its-getting-ugly-in-hungary>.

34 Balazs Koraanyi, “Orbán Mobilizes Hungary’s Troops, Prisoners, Jobless to Fence Out Migrants,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-hungary-fence-insight-idUSKCN0RN0FW20150923>.

Some have argued that Fidesz has already gone too far in adopting Jobbik's ideology whether out of opportunism or genuine conviction.³⁵ Regardless of motive, the result is that the line between Jobbik and Fidesz has blurred: the tactical moderation of Jobbik and the consequent radicalization of Fidesz has mainstreamed far-right narratives, establishing a new anti-immigrant norm in Hungary for other center-right leaders to follow. Czech President Miloš Zeman; Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico; and Jarosław Kaczyński, Chairman of the Law and Justice Party, which won the most recent parliamentary elections in Poland, now seem comfortable with the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric that only a year ago was the exclusive domain of the far right.

Responding to the Far-Right Challenge

In Western Europe, far-right parties are now a normal part of the political spectrum. But in Central and Eastern Europe, where far-right parties are gaining support but still lag behind their West European counterparts, there is still time to curtail the far right's rise. As serious challenges to the European vision loom ahead, that window of opportunity will not stay open for long. Whether a far-right party will go the way of Romania's PRM, slowly declining into political oblivion, or follow Jobbik's path of success will largely depend on the response of national political leaders, EU institutions, and US policymakers, who have until now turned a blind eye to the far-right challenge brewing in Europe's East. Looking the other way, however, is no longer an option: The extremist movements garnering support in Central and Eastern Europe will fractionalize the European Union, the United States' most important ally, with their isolationist and anti-liberal politics.

Jobbik, the most electorally successful party of the Central and Eastern European far right, is fast becoming a trendsetter for similar parties in the region, such as the Slovak National Party in Slovakia and Ataka in Bulgaria. As the refugee crisis escalates and fears of terrorist attacks increase, the political climate in Central and Eastern European countries, which now find themselves on the frontlines of the immigration crisis, will become more polarized. With anxious citizens calling for border controls, stricter immigration rules against refugees from the Middle East, and

protectionist economic policies, centrist politicians will be forced to address public demand. If other center-right parties follow Fidesz's strategy of adaptation by taking up the far-right agenda, Europe's East may well become the hotbed of far-right nationalism that many observers once (wrongly) predicted it would be in the 1990s.

What is more, if the center right embraces a turn to the far right, the winners will not be European citizens, who now take for granted the benefits afforded by EU institutions, such as visa-free travel and the ability to work in any EU country. The EU-US relationship will also suffer as the far right increases its support and influence on the center; the core of the transatlantic relationship, rooted in liberal democratic values, will no longer guide policy decisions. As the ideological gulf between Europe and the United States grows, it will become difficult, if not impossible, to coordinate policy positions, such as economic sanctions against common threats or engagement in conflict zones, with European leaders who have a diametrically opposed view of the world.

Rather, a pivot to the right will first and foremost benefit the far-right extremists themselves, whose illiberal agenda will be legitimized. The other winners will be authoritarian regimes, most notably Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin has endorsed and even financed far-right parties such as the National Front and allegedly Jobbik as well.³⁶ And the admiration is mutual: Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, the far right today is openly pro-Russian and anti-American. Far-right leaders maintain close relationships with the Kremlin—traveling to Russia for various celebrations, including Putin's birthday, and even serving as election observers in falsified balloting, such as the illegal referendum for the annexation of Crimea.³⁷

As the far right's electoral appeal grows, while the mainstream center left and center right fail to present an alternative, Europe is on a course toward a new political reality—one in which Marine Le Pen may become Madame la Présidente and Jobbik the ruling party in Hungary. The biggest loser in this scenario will

35 Cas Mudde, "The Hungary PM Made a 'Rivers of Blood' Speech ... and No One Cares," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/30/viktor-orban-fidesz-hungary-prime-minister-europe-neo-nazi>.

36 Alina Polyakova, "Strange Bedfellows: Putin and Europe's Far Right," *World Affairs Journal*, September/October 2014.

37 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Pro-Russian Extremists Observe the Illegitimate Crimean 'Referendum'," *Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog*, March 17, 2014, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/03/pro-russian-extremists-observe.html>.

be the EU, but this course can still be diverted through efforts by center-left and center-right European leaders and with closer attention from the United States.

First, center-right parties should not follow Fidesz's strategy of acquiescence to the far right, which only benefits the latter. This approach will not quell the legitimate and growing concerns of Europeans. Rather, center-right parties should seek to provide pragmatic solutions to the immigration challenge by engaging with minority and majority communities at the local and regional levels with the goal of increasing communication and interaction between ethnic and religious groups. The far right has effectively mobilized at the local level with targeted campaigns, and centrist parties should seek to compete on the same strategic turf.

Second, at the national level, centrist parties could learn a lesson from the 2015 regional elections in France in which the Socialists and the Republicans worked to push out far-right candidates. This tactic, however, is a short-term Band-Aid that can easily backfire by feeding the far right's conspiratorial claims.

In the long term, countering the far-right challenge requires that the center left reimagine its role in European politics. The appeal of far-right ideology can be seen as a reflection of the left's failure to provide a comprehensive response to the challenges of the twenty-first century. Today, there is no clear leftist vision that can capture the hearts and minds of Europeans while putting forward financially and socially viable solutions. Rather, the left has developed its own extremist flank, which is hijacking moderate

centrist parties in Spain, England, and Greece. Before the center left can respond to the challenge from the right, it must consolidate its own core values and deal with internal political fractionalization.

Lastly, the United States has a role to play in helping Europe through its crisis of illiberal politics. Since World War II, US leadership and support has been crucial to Europe's economic and political stability. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States stepped in to prop up the new transitional democracies of Europe's East because, at

the time, policymakers rightfully saw the strategic importance of these countries to ensuring a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. But as other foreign policy challenges have taken priority, US investment and engagement in the region has waned. Now that the West faces a revanchist Russia on Europe's borders and the growing appeal of authoritarian regimes across the globe, it is time to remember how only twenty-five years ago, US leadership and Western Europe's resolve helped bring democratic institutions, liberal values, and economic prosperity to Central and Eastern Europe. Those values and institutions now face their greatest ideological challenges

since the Cold War. By once again reinvesting in Europe's East, one of the greatest achievements of the twentieth century, the post-socialist transformation of Europe can still be saved.

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