The Nationalist International: Is There a Brown Network in the Making?

https://www.e-ir.info/2017/03/12/the-nationalist-international-is-there-a-brown-network-in-the-making/

LéONIE DE JONGE, MAR 12 2017

With the deepening and widening of the European Union, the importance of national borders has diminished considerably. However, in the face of rising nationalism this trend may now be reversed. Indeed, Europe appears to be witnessing the reassertion of the nation-state with the ascent of so-called 'right-wing populist parties'.

Popular news sources seem particularly worried by the prospect of a European alliance of far-right movements. But while there may have been an increase in international cooperation between right-wing populist parties, their ideologies are inherently incompatible, making the formation of a united European far-right movement very improbable.

Right-wing populist parties are notoriously hard to define. First and foremost, they rarely self-identify as 'right-wing populists'. Moreover, unlike other European party families such as the Greens, for instance, right-wing populist parties generally do not share similar party names across different polities (e.g.: *Vlaams Belang* or Flemish Interest in Belgium; *Front National* or National Front in France; *Partij voor de Vrijheid* or Freedom Party in the Netherlands). Finally, populist radical right parties rarely cooperate internationally.

Ironically, the European Parliament has provided an opportunity for more coordinated and formal cooperation between right-wing populist movements. Despite numerous initiatives, however, populist radical right-wing parties have not been able to form a stable and coherent parliamentary group, as past attempts to join forces have been brought down by personality clashes and internal rivalries. While the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) as well as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) form part of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group, the French National Front (FN) and the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) belong to the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group (ENF). Meanwhile, the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has sent one representative to each of these parliamentary groups.

In the past, right-wing populist leaders in Europe have often refused to be associated with other right-wing movements for fear of being tainted by allegations of radicalism or extremism. In 2014, for instance, Nigel Farage rejected an offer from Marine Le Pen's *Front National* (FN) to form an alliance at the European Parliament, accusing the latter of lingering 'prejudice and anti-Semitism'. Similarly, Marine Le Pen renounced all ties to the Belgian Front National (FNb), a far-right Walloon party that was quite evidently modelled after its French namesake. Instead, Le Pen took the FNb to court for copying their name and logo, thereby contributing to the party's dissolution in 2012.

The reluctance to be associated with other far-right movements may have eased in recent years as the general success of right-wing parties seems to have made them more *salonfähig*. On January 21, 2017 – the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump – some of Europe's most prominent far-right leaders, including Geert Wilders (PVV), Marine Le Pen (FN) and Frauke Petry (AfD) met in Koblenz, Germany, in a renewed effort to strengthen their ties. Speaking in Koblenz, Le Pen alluded to the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, dubbing 2016 'the year in which the Anglo-Saxon world woke up'. She then proceeded to declare that 2017 will be 'the year of awakening for the people of continental Europe'.

With important elections coming up in the Netherlands, France and Germany, the Koblenz meeting was, above all, an attempt to exploit the populist momentum by riding the coattails of other successful movements.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. On social media platforms, right-wing populist leaders have long been cheering for one another. Examples range from supportive tweets from Geert Wilders for the right-wing candidate Norbert Hofer during the 2016 Austrian presidential elections, to celebratory posts by Nigel Farage lauding Donald Trump for winning the American elections. The most striking instance was perhaps that of Marine Le Pen changing her Facebook profile picture to the British Union Jack to congratulate Nigel Farage in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum.

The image of a nationalist leader taking on the national emblem of another country is puzzling. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the idea of what some have called a 'Nationalist International' is causing great alarm among mainstream politicians and popular media commentators. As I have argued, however, these fears are largely unwarranted. Far-right parties in Europe are not homogenous and their motives to cooperate internationally are generally strategic rather than ideological. These parties are, by definition, strongly nationalist, and they therefore primarily operate in a closed domestic political environment.

International cooperation between right-wing populists is not built on shared policy goals. They are strange bedfellows yoked together by a common enemy, namely the European Union. Indeed, right-wing populist parties across Europe are consistently advocating the reassertion of the nation-state and opposition to further European integration. In general, right-wing populists are often more easily defined by what they are against than what they stand for. As suggested by its title, the Koblenz 'counter-summit' was primarily driven by opposition to 'globalism' and mainstream politics rather than common policy goals.

Since electoral gains can legitimise their cause, attempts by right-wing populists to join forces internationally will probably intensify if these parties become more successful domestically. They are also likely to continue for as long as they can find unity in opposition to a common foe. Yet, cooperation between the populist radical right party family should not be overstated. In 2007, Michael Minkenberg and Pascal Perrineau already noted that 'there is nothing more difficult to establish than an international group of nationalists'. This has not changed; because of divergent nationalist agendas, the creation of a stable and unified alliance between right-wing populist parties seems highly unlikely.

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