FASCISM AND NATIONAL POPULISM

Losers in the crisis? Europe’s radical right wing in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Far-right activist at a demonstration in Warsaw in March 2018. Photography by Jordi Borràs

Crises are the fuel for the populism and extremism of the right: The radical right foments and bolsters fears, flags up scapegoats by means of racist attributions and anti-Semitic conspiracy ideologies and pursues nationalistic efforts at domination under the cloak of “national sovereignty”. It mobilises resentments, contradictions and discontent in the population, which often accompany fears about the future and the worry that their own national or ethnic group is disadvantaged in competition with other groups. A historical study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York discovered a significant connection between the intensity of regions affected by the flu pandemic of 1918-1919 and the support for the Nazis in the subsequent elections at the beginning of the 1930s [1]. In the crises of the early 21st century, populist apportioning of blame thrived whereby the “elites” did not protect “the people” from external threats, but betrayed them. Must the lessons from the experiences of the 20th century and the political reaction to the economic crisis after 2007 and the migration crisis from 2015 now be considered outdated in regard to the coronavirus pandemic and the effects of the crisis? Europeans have again rallied with heightened force behind the “elites” and liberal governments in the coronavirus crisis.

Although the radical and populist right in many countries has reacted similarly to the coronavirus-induced crisis, it turns out around the world – and especially in Europe – that the right-wing parties have not until now been able to convert the greatest global crisis since the second world war into votes. On the contrary: the popularity of the right wing is eroding. Right-wing parties in many European countries from Spain to Germany have lost approval in election forecasts. Exceptions are the Hungarian ruling party, Fidesz, the Belgian Vlaams Belang and the PVV in the Netherlands, which have not lost. Indeed in Italy the League lost, but the extreme right-wing party Brothers of Italy gained strength. In Germany (AfD) as well as in Spain (Vox), the right-wing parties finally stabilised again close to the original level before the crisis after appreciable slumps at the height of the first coronavirus wave in March and April.

The loss of votes and stagnation for the right wing are understandable because the programmatic and propagandist performance of right-wing politicians in the crisis has been poor until now. This has particularly fatal consequences where the radical and populist right forms the government. The countries on earth with the highest absolute Covid-19 infection rates are led by politicians who fall within the radical and populist right: Brazil, the United States and Great Britain. Although only 4.25% of the global population lives in the USA, more than a quarter of the infections and fatalities with Covid-19 recorded worldwide have occurred in the USA [2]. The nationalism researchers Woods et al. see a reason for this in the attacks which provide a source of identity by populists against the supposed “corrupt elite”, which also include experts, academics and scientists. The delegitimisation of scientific expertise and global cooperation as well as transnational organisations like the World Health Organisation (WHO) make it difficult to react to the threats in such a way that damage is averted or at least reduced. The anti-elite and anti-scientific agitation of the radical and populist right has undoubtedly led to higher rates of COVID-19 infection and mortality [3].

Radical and populist right reaction to COVID-19

The answers of the radical and populist right to the pandemic are similar worldwide: deflection, rejection, trivialisation and denial. The right-wing parties first attacked the governments in France, Italy, Austria and Germany among others because they had ordered the lockdown too late. A little later, they criticised the lockdown for being too strict and long. Beside the respective national governments, Europe’s radical and populist right criticises the European Union again and again. In accordance with their general policy DNA, the right demands nationalistic answers to the pandemic. Many right-wing parties in Europe also follow a programme of welfare chauvinism in health policy. The programme aims to organise access to healthcare provision unequally (even more strongly than previously), and, above all, to exclude immigrant groups in need of protection from this. This political agenda presents a threat for many communities, for example for unemployed or economically weak people [4]. This policy is dividing the social cohesion and is suited to encouraging the spread of pandemics.

The lines of argument of the radical and populist right are similar in Great Britain, Italy,

Spain, Austria, Poland, Germany, Hungary, France and the USA. In order to profit from the crisis, the right often uses strongly emotionalising speech and presents itself in lockdown as helper and advocate for the isolated local old people. They maintain that nobody would have died with closed borders, and that migration, globalisation and multiculturalism are the real roots of the evil, which must be radically cut back. Multiculturalism has thus destroyed social cohesion, which is why the national companies are not in a position to avoid the pandemic.

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With respect to the assessment of the virus, disagreement prevails in the radical and populist right in Europe: some regard it generally as a fabrication, or at least as being portrayed in an exaggerated manner: in truth it is nothing more than a little flu. Others stress the threatening nature of the virus as an “imported” danger for which China alone bears responsibility, or it is maintained that Covid-19 has been cultivated deliberately as a biological weapon (by China, Bill Gates or Israel). In slogans and social networks it is clear: Europe’s radical right adopts positions from Donald Trump and his radical right supporters from the USA – including the delusional QAnon conspiracy stories. For instance, thousands of right-wing German opponents of the government sent letters to the Trump government requesting the American embassy to invade Germany and to free the country by means of (once again) an occupation. Trump in turn called upon his –in part armed– supporters to “free” the US federal states from the Corona lockdown.

In the radical-right and conspiracy-ideological communities of social networks, pro-terrorist messages that glorify violence, particularly against Jews and other minorities, are being spread. Anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives are particularly prevalent in the USA according to assessments by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The virus should be used as a biological weapon against these groups. For some, it involves the fall of the system: accelerationists dream of exploiting the crisis situation and of strengthening by means of targeted attacks. The latent threat of violence is thereby heightened: entire sections of the population are increasingly isolated from reality, in particular by conspiracy ideologies such as QAnon, which are more and more prevalent in social networks.

These limited environments, that were formerly extensive on virtual networking, influence the protests against the coronavirus measures of the national governments and are happening in many European countries: In the summer of 2020, demonstrations took place, among others, in Spain, Italy, Austria, Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Romania and Greece, in which –and in part exclusively– right-wing radical groups and parties mobilised. Germany is developing as a European centre of protests against the coronavirus measures: about 20,000 people demonstrated in Berlin at the beginning of

August. Although the right-wing party AfD is also trying to benefit from this anti-government sentiment –and to fuel it– it has until now only played a minor role in the protests. Supporters of conspiracy ideologies, the anti-immunisation lobby, anthroposophists and esoterics shape the picture and the political communication of the vague spectrum of protest –yet the limits of the right-wing radicalism are fluid–.

Some former left-leaning alternative critics of globalisation, so-called citizens of the empire –who deny the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany– as well as neo-Nazis, anti-Semites and politicians and supporters of the AfD also count among the demonstrators. Representative polls of the citizens from Germany show, however, that the protests are isolated: following a questionnaire by the Forsa polling institute, 91% of the population have no sympathy for the protests. Only in the electorate of the right-wing AfD party did the demonstrations meet with the approval of the majority. In comparison, in December 2014, 29% of Germans expressed understanding for right-wing demonstrations against “the Islamisation of the Western World” (PEGIDA).

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For right-wing radicals such as the Identitarian Movement, the partly heterogeneous protests of the coronavirus deniers are, above all, a vehicle to strengthen dissatisfaction and mistrust of “elites” and globalisation, and thereby aimed to increase the social resonance space for nationalistic and populist sounds. For instance, Martin Sellner, one of the leading right-wing extremists outside of parliament in Europe, has been campaigning for such a strategy since the first protests in April 2020. In the rejection of the coronavirus measures in Europe, there is mixture of the extreme right and the anti-vaccination scene, who join together among other things in the common bogeyman, Bill Gates. It is suggested that he and his foundation want to implant microchips by vaccination in order to dominate the world.

This is consistent with the right-wing radical rejection of globalisation, cosmopolitanism and liberalism, as well as the anti-Semitic allegation of a secret Jewish global government. Overall these opposition protest environments are isolated, while large majorities are turning towards the prevailing politics in greater strength. A representative online survey which was carried out in western European countries in March and April 2020 comes to the conclusion that the lockdown has increased voting intentions for the party of the incumbent head of state, trust in the government and satisfaction with democracy. Non-populist governments are thus benefiting from the fact that, generally speaking, the population gathers round its national leaders in the management of the crisis [5].

So obviously not all crises are the same: because, while the so-called refugee crisis in many countries in Europe in 2015-2016 led to massive polarisation, fundamental criticism of the government and a strengthening of the radical and populist right, the provisional result in the coronavirus crisis is the opposite: the right is losing. Non-universal uncertainties and unideological worries appear to be decisive in whether radical and populist right-wingers benefit from crises. Instead, the decisive issue is which central content-related claims a crisis poses –also constantly characterised by media and public discourse–. Migration, nationalism and racism are content-related key issues of the radical and populist right, which they can propagate authentically. On the other hand, the pandemic –just as the climate crisis– only touches the identity-creating right-wing topics on the margins, and therefore cannot be used by them on a larger scale just yet. It is not clear whether the radical right can succeed in using the economic recession and the social upheaval resulting from the coronavirus crisis.

Losers in the crisis?

So, are the right-wing parties losers in the crisis? Possibly those who reach their goals via detours will, however, be winners in the long term. Because even non-right governments have intermittently closed national borders for the purpose of fighting the pandemic. National governments demonstrated greater efficiency than the European Union. Their policy is supported by very large parts of the population and the ruling powers are recording growing trust: the pandemic has meanwhile strengthened national cohesion. Yet strong nation states, authoritarian crackdowns against dissenters and closed borders are the dream of all nationalistic populists. The extreme right-wing parties will probably also lose popularity because the national governments have satisfied the national need for control. But, in the long term, this path poses a danger to the European Union, multilateralism and liberal democracy.

National isolation and disintegration cannot be a sustainable solution for global climate. On the contrary: the critical consequences of global warming will further intensify if the global north further consumes and produces at the expense of the south and leaves alone the people who are particularly affected by climate change. Furthermore there are clear indications that racist depreciations and hostility are growing due to the coronavirus crisis. There have been numerous acts of violence based on prejudice worldwide, especially against Asian looking-people. In some cases, for example, people were attacked with disinfectant out of racist motives. Refugees, Muslims, Jews as well as Romani and Gypsies were disparaged in campaigns by the radical right, while they were adjudged to be guilty for the pandemic or it was claimed these groups received privileged treatment from the state. A recent opinion survey from the Czech Republic shows that the significance of the Covid-19 crisis is strengthening the hostile attitudes towards foreigners [6].

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> paint an image of nationalisation as a success story

A Spanish opinion survey, as well as other national surveys, also shows that the willingness to sacrifice fundamental civil freedoms and to support strong leadership to contain the spread of a pandemic like this one [7]. This goes hand in hand with the danger of state and politics becoming more authoritarian and repressive in the long run: control and surveillance could spread and outlast the pandemic. Authoritarian tendencies will find things easier if they encounter less resistance. On the basis of their data, authors are therefore warning that the COVID-19 pandemic is preparing the breeding ground for the erosion of democratic principles and the acceptance of a technocratic or authoritarian turn. The exceptional situation requires responsible politics, effective control of the government and of the state authorities, as well as a keen eye from the media and civil society. Conspiracy ideological mobilisations and radical right campaigns, which –under the pretext of protecting basic rights– are in reality pursuing particularistic, nationalistic and racist interests, thwart the serious struggle for liberal democracy.

Despite the setbacks for the radical and populist right in many European countries, it is too early for the all-clear: liberal democracy in Europe is in danger. We must not forget that the problem is not individual persons or parties, but their reactionary and exclusionary contents: in particular authoritarianism, nationalism and perceptions of inequality. It is therefore problematic for governments and non-right-wing parties to also play these cards, since right of freedom will be trimmed in the long term. The right-wing radicals will paint an image of nationalisation as a success story, stress the division between “people attached to their homeland” and the “globalist elites”, and derive claims from the new normal that will stand in the way of the ideals of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and multilateralism.

In Hungary and Poland, the right-wing governments have used the pandemic in order to expand their powers. A further danger is indirectly linked with the pandemic: the deep economic crisis as well as the unhealthy anti-scientific politics of US president Donald Trump during the pandemic could be the deciding factor in the president losing the election on 3 November 2020. It is not improbable that Trump will not recognise the result of the election and will try to hold onto power by means of conspiracy stories about electoral manipulation and of pressure from his weapon-carrying supporters. Such an attempt in the former heart of western democracy could also postpone the Overton window of the democratic (value) system in Europa and extend the tools of the radical right for a coup. In Germany and Austria, among others, the extra-parliamentary radical right has been carrying out campaigns for some years. These campaigns systematically challenge or dispute the legitimacy of elections and claim electoral fraud to the disadvantage of right-wing parties.

Conclusion

Like for everyone else, the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 abruptly put a spoke in the wheel of the plans of the radicals and populists and, to say the least, postponed their

campaigns. Before the pandemic, the positioning of the right wing in the climate debate had gained in importance worldwide. Here too Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro are “pioneers” for the far right, promoting the overexploitation of the environment and relativising and denying man-made climate change. The programmatic referral and connecting of the international right-wingers to this topic has been suppressed in the meantime by the urgency of the pandemic. Many arguments and modes of interaction of the radical and populist right with the coronavirus and climate crises are very similar. Anti-intellectualism and the rejection of scientific facts and life threatening dangers generally characterise the handling of the coronavirus crisis as well as the climate crisis by the radical and populist right internationally. Radical-right deniers of climate change, opponents of the global climate movement and anti-Greta Thunberg activists have simple transferred their patterns of argument from the climate crisis to the coronavirus pandemic.

> In order to counter the trend of nationalisation as well as the agitation of the European right, the European Union’s coronavirus aid package must be fast and tangibly noticeable. Therein lies a chance to improve the reputation of the European project

There are numerous references to climate topics in the arguments and discourses of the opponents to the coronavirus coping measures. Many demonstrators are driven not just by criticism of individual coronavirus measures by governments, but above all by egoistic and chauvinistic motives. The asserted concern about the loss of freedom and basic rights often means in reality a concern about the loss of freedom without considering the costs for others. They sense that externalisation of the costs of the way of life and methods of production of globalised capitalism cannot work for ever. Yet instead of struggling for sustainable solutions, the look for their salvation in an excessive individualism to libertarian egoism, which can find its expression in national and populist chauvinism as well as in anti-political and esoteric escapism at the same time. Neither in the pandemic nor in the climate question are they willing to accept restrictions and solidarity; and they flee in absurd, and in part completely, contradictory alternative and conspiracy ideologies.

The way in which the far right is dealing with the pandemic can provide important information on the increasing conflicts of the global climate crisis. Last but not least, it can be used to study how democrats should deal with the attacks from the far right. In the pandemic there lies a chance for a responsible science and fact-based politics, to win the long-term trust of a large majority of the population and to strengthen resilience to populist and nationalistic propaganda. Politics, media and civil society must not allow the small, and in large part, reactionary minority of those who deny and trivialise the pandemic as well as the climate crisis –found in all western societies– to succeed in dominating the public voice and driving politics forwards. Europe and global society face multiple challenges in the context of the pandemic: this includes the protection and health of the population, but also multilateral cooperation and the pushing back of authoritarian, nationalistic and racist tendencies in international politics as well as in the attitudes of the population and in

political culture.

In order to counter the trend of nationalisation as well as the agitation of the European right, the European Union's coronavirus aid package must be fast and tangibly noticeable. Therein lies a chance to improve the reputation of the European project if the funding policy is efficient, fast and with justifiable bureaucratic effort in reaching those who are dependent on financial help. The growing dissemination of conspiracy ideological content requires more clarification and prevention about the psychological, political and media operating modes of such offerings. Messages of hate, calls for violence and disinformation in social networks cannot only be followed with repressive measures, but require sensitised and mature citizens who object and do not allow themselves to be seduced. But the democratic balance can also be shaken by the government's abuse of the trust of the population. This would be disastrous –in particularly in regard to the necessity– that has become visible in the coronavirus crisis for a political, economic and ecological transformation of European regimes of inequality to more sustainable, just, resilient and open societies that can oppose the poisons of authoritarianism, egoism and nationalism.

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