

# THE STATE OF THE EUROPEAN “RIGHT”:

## A WIDE VARIETY OF FORTUNES FOR A WIDE VARIETY OF PARTIES

DEREK TURNER

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The picture presented by parties of the nationalist and populist Right in Europe is one of great complexity and fluidity. Almost every country in Europe has a party that considers itself, or is considered by others, to be rightwing nationalist—although such parties often attract other epithets too! With the disappearance of communism in the East, and the continuing degradation of the quality of life across Europe, has come an unprecedented upsurge in populist, anti-establishment nationalism.

As can only be expected from such a diverse assemblage of countries, they are all very different in their styles and emphases. In the northern and western parts of Europe, such parties are often at least partly free market, tax-cutting, Atlanticist, pro-Israel, and sometimes even libertarian in tendency. In southern Europe they are more usually corporatist or semi-corporatist, often with a strong traditionalist Catholic support base. In the east these parties often include many ex-communists and have a nationalist veneer; they fear their neighbors’ territorial ambitions, and are usually strongly anti-American and anti-Semitic. Often they are centered around individuals rather than particular ideologies, and reflect their leaders’ personal tastes and character traits.

Furthermore, these parties are often extremely volatile. Facing, as they do, unique cultural, ideological, and credibility barriers; unused to success and government; filled with strong personalities and fragile egos; often made up of unlikely coalitions of interest groups, they are especially prone to splits and internecine squabbling. In the east, the situation is especially confusing, with parties springing up and disappearing overnight. In Bulgaria alone, there are over two hundred political parties. Such parties often experience spectacular victories followed by equally spectacular defeats.

In Austria, Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party (FPÖ) has been in government, out of government, and back into government within the past two years, as a junior partner in a conservative coalition with Wolfgang Schüssel’s Austrian People’s Party. After Haider stepped down as leader in 2001, to deflect attacks by the European Union at the time of his party’s original election to office, the party had a succession of short-lived caretaker leaders, who between them helped lose the FPÖ half of its support. To be fair to these politicians, much of this

draining away of support was inevitable; parties like the FPÖ often benefit from being anti-establishment. When they enter into coalitions, and inevitable compromises start to be made, some of their impatient or less practical supporters lose their faith. At present, from his power base in the province of Carinthia, and with the assistance of key allies like Matthias Ewald, Haider is angling to regain control of the party, in preparation for the European elections of 2004.

In Belgium, the Vlaams Blok, which is one of the most sensible and successful of the small rightwing parties, had its greatest electoral success ever in May 2003. Campaigning on a resolutely anti-immigration, anti-corruption, and Flemish separatist platform, the Blok is now the fifth-largest party in Belgium, attracting 11.6 percent of the Belgian vote and 17.9 percent of the Flemish vote. It has 18 seats in the federal chamber of representatives and, with 7 seats out of 24, is the largest party on Antwerp's city council. However, this electoral clout does not do it much good directly, because all the other political parties have imposed a *cordon sanitaire* on the party, refusing it all cooperation. The Vlaams Blok has a counterpart in the Francophone part of Belgium, the Front National, with which it has surprisingly cordial relations, bearing in mind that the Flemish party depicts Wallonia as an economic basket case and deplores the Frenchification of the Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium. At present, the Belgian FN has 5.6 percent of the Walloon vote, which equates to one seat in the chamber of representatives and one seat in the senate.

In Croatia, Franjo Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party was in power until 1999, but it fell apart after his death. Today, the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) has five seats in parliament, but it is far removed from the center of power in a country that, like many in Eastern Europe, is so anxious to become part of the European Union that it is desperately trying to live down its "racist," "sexist," and "homophobic" past.

In the Czech Republic, the Republikani Miroslava Sladka party, led by doctor of philosophy Miroslav Sladek, used to get 8 percent of the vote, making it one of the largest parties in the parliament. But the party was routinely excluded by President Vaclav Havel from parliamentary delegations (Havel also excluded communists from these delegations). The "Velvet Revolutionary" further displayed his liberal conscience by using his presidential prerogative to pardon two gypsies who had assaulted and injured Sladek. The RMS subsequently lost all its seats in 1998, went through a split, and failed to make any headway in the most recent election.

In Denmark, the Danish People's Party attracted 12 percent of the vote in the 2001 election. While it was excluded from the conservative coalition government, Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen felt constrained to pass restrictive asylum legislation, with the result that asylum applications have halved since his government came to power. As it has been historically careful in its connections, and has always expressed itself in moderate terminology, the

DPP is in the unique position among populist, anti-immigration parties of being regarded by the British Conservative Party as eminently “respectable,” attracting British Conservative members of the European Parliament as speakers at its meetings.

In France, the Front National raised the hackles of the world media in 2002, when, admittedly assisted by a leftwing split, it came in second in the first round of the presidential elections. The FN’s 18 percent showing in the second round, while superficially disappointing, was nonetheless a remarkable achievement, considering that all the parties (with the insignificant exception of Bruno Mégret’s dying Mouvement National Républicain) had endorsed Chirac. Bearing in mind the vitriolic campaigning against Le Pen, which encompassed everything from organized marches of schoolchildren lispng anti-racist slogans, anarchist demonstrations calling for Le Pen’s death, and sermons from the world’s pulpits, to Chirac’s refusal to meet Le Pen in a televised debate (the only time the final two French presidential candidates have not had such a debate), the FN did extremely well to increase its share of the vote. Hearteningly, one of the fastest-growing FN support groups is voters under twenty-five. The FN expects to do well in the 2004 regional elections, especially in Provence and Cote d’Azur.

In Germany, the small rightwing parties are moribund, largely because the Christian Democrats, and more especially their Christian Social Union allies in Bavaria, have in recent years been moving gradually to the right. They opposed the Schröder government’s proposals to liberalize German nationality laws, and were attacked for their “Kinder, nicht Inder” campaign poster in 2001, which called for increasing the German birthrate instead of increasing immigration from the Indian subcontinent. The most respectable of the smaller parties is the Republikaner party, formerly led by Waffen SS sergeant and television talkshow host Franz Schönhuber, but now led by medical doctor Rolf Schlierer. The Republikaner once had several seats in the German parliament, but now has none, and attracts between 1 and 2 percent of the vote in Bavaria, and 3.5 percent in Bremen. Next is the Bürgerinitiative party (or the Partei Rechtsstaatliche Offensive [PRO]) of former judge Roland Schill, who enjoyed brief success with his populist campaigns against immigration and crime, even being elected senator for the Hamburg region – only to be dismissed in August 2003, after a complicated scandal.

Then there is the Deutsche Volksunion, led by millionaire publisher Gerhard Frey – although a question mark has been placed over its long-term future, since the party did not stand in the September 2002 elections. Then, least reputable of all, is the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, strongest in eastern Germany, and unfortunately characterized by a large skinhead element. Last year, in an amusing interlude reminiscent of G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* (in which a police spy infiltrates an anarchist group only to find out that all the other members of the group are also police spies),

the German Constitutional Court, backed by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, tried to ban the NPD as a supposed menace to democracy, only to find that the party was so riddled with police agents that they were all provoking and informing on each other. Despite the political pressure, the case had to be thrown out. News is now coming in of a new, Bavarian-based party, Democracy Direct, which aims to unite disaffected activists from the Christian Social Union (already on the hard Right of mainstream politics) with the nationalist Right.

In Greece, for the first time in decades, a new rightwing party, the Hellenic Front, which is affiliated with the French FN, is starting to register on the political radar, obtaining 1.4 percent of the vote in Athens last year, and 4.5 percent in one other municipality. This has given the Hellenic Front three local councillors.

In Hungary, the Justice and Life Party, led by playwright Istvan Czurka, was briefly respectable after the collapse of the communists, and had 14 seats in parliament and several government portfolios in 2000, as part of a rightwing coalition. But a combination of leftwing disapproval and unwise statements by the party's leaders—its vice president received an eighteen-month suspended sentence in 2003 for saying that Jews should be segregated from other Hungarians—meant that their vote collapsed in 2002, falling to 4.36 percent (parliamentary representation starts at 5 percent). The presence of a splinter group, the Hungarian National Front, did not help matters.

In Ireland, which has only recently developed a race problem—thanks mostly to a law that anyone born in Ireland automatically becomes an Irish citizen (this law has just been attacked by the High Court, but we shall have to see if it makes any material difference)—there is no properly organized anti-immigration party, although there are small social conservative parties. However, at least two new parties are planned in the near future, one of them being organized by a flamboyant anti-abortion and anti-EU campaigner named Justin Barrett, who became briefly notorious last year, when his links with the German NPD and Italy's Forza Nuova were profiled in the media.

In Italy, the populist Right is in government. Both Umberto Bossi's Liga Nord and Gianfranco Fini's Alleanza Nazionale (AN) have been part of the Forza Italia coalition under Silvio Berlusconi since 2001, with three ministries allotted to each party. Even by Italian standards, this is an unstable coalition, attempting to encompass Bossi's ideal of independence for northern Italy and the AN's nostalgic Italian integralism. Bossi is very outspoken, and has caused headaches for Berlusconi by saying, *inter alia*, that Brussels "wants to legalize paedophilia," and that he wanted to "hear the cannon roar" against the boatloads of illegal immigrants who try to cross the Adriatic from Albania every night. "Illegal immigrants," he went on, "need to be hounded out, either nicely or nastily." By contrast, Fini has been trying very hard to be respectable, although his efforts are constantly set back by an increasing flood of Mussolini

nostalgia expressed by senior AN politicians, including one who said that he wished Italy and Germany had won the war. Out beyond the government, there are two other groups, Pino Rauti's Fiamma Tricolore (with whom Forza Italia made an electoral pact in Sicily in 2001) and Roberto Fiore's "third positionist," ultra-Catholic Forza Nuova.

The Netherlands, of course, had a rare burst of interesting politics in 2002, when the flamboyant homosexual libertarian Pim Fortuyn began to make waves by saying that Islam was "backward," that Muslim immigration should be stopped because of Islamic "homophobia," and that the Netherlands was overpopulated and could accept no more immigrants. He was expelled from the neo-conservative Liveable Netherlands party for these remarks, so he formed his own party, the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (List of Pim Fortuyn). The party was projected to do well in the elections of May 2002, and then Fortuyn was murdered by an animal rights fanatic. In the subsequent elections, his party (still called the Lijst Pim Fortuyn) did extremely well, winning 26 seats in the Dutch parliament and joining the government. But the party was a personality cult rather than a normal political party, and in the absence of that personality, the party—which had briefly united social conservatives with gay rights activists, and immigration restrictionists with assimilated immigrants from the former Dutch colonies—fell apart, precipitating the collapse of the coalition. The new government, which came to power last May, is led by the Christian Democrats, and does not include any LPF members—although individual LPF members supported the government's recent asylum bill, and in local government in Rotterdam, former LPF members, now confusingly calling themselves Liveable Netherlands, work closely with the Christian Democrats on asylum and crime. There are two smaller, more traditionally ultra-right parties—the Center Democrats and the Netherlands Bloc—but with only one local councillor each, they are unimportant.

In Norway, Carl Hagen's Progress Party obtained 14.6 percent of the vote in the December 2001 election, approximating to 26 seats in the 165-seat parliament, and the conservative government has to rely on them. This has ensured that the government has passed restrictive asylum laws, and kept its distance from the EU.

In Poland, the League of Polish Families, an ultra-Catholic group which is strongly Eurosceptic and has expressed strong reservations about immigration, won 8.7 percent in 2001. The Alternative Social Movement, led by Michal Janusewski, which has several MPs, invited Jean-Marie Le Pen to visit Poland's legislature, but the visit was called off after protests from the far Left.

In Portugal, the Popular Party, led by journalist Paulo Portas, has 14 seats in the 230-seat parliament (9 percent of the vote) and is part of the governing coalition, which has just announced immigration restrictions and called for national powers to be repatriated from Brussels.

In Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party is affiliated with the French FN. Zhirinovsky, presently vice-speaker of the national assembly, is both a hindrance and a help to his side. His publicity skills are unquestionable. The problem is that often this publicity is gained through preposterous suggestions, such as using nuclear weapons against hostile neighbors and expanding Russia to the Indian Ocean. He also veers between acute anti-Semitism and acute philo-Semitism – with the emphasis on the latter since he discovered his own Jewish ancestry. There are several other parties – the People's Patriotic Party and the National Power Party, which sounds like an electricity provider! – but none of them has any electoral strength. However, it is worth noting that in national elections held in December 2003, Zhirinovsky's LDP and the Homeland Party-National Patriotic Union won nearly 20 percent of the vote.

The Serbian Radical Party, which has previously been in government, presently has five seats in the national legislature and two members in the federal Chamber of Republics, but understandably enough, politics in Serbia still center on post-Yugoslavia unrest, and they are unlikely to make further headway until the outstanding war issues are resolved.

In Spain, a regionalist party called Platform for Catalonia did unexpectedly well in local elections this year, and now controls five councils in the region. The Independent Liberal Group, led by former Christian Democrat Jesus Gil, which has made noises about immigration, controls Marbella city council, but is held back by its leader's alleged links with organized crime. A Francoist party called Frente Espanol, led by Jesus Lopez and a former Franco minister, has just announced it will contest elections in 2004.

In Sweden, the Swedish Democrats won 1.4 percent of the vote in the 2002 elections and became the biggest extraparliamentary party. In October 2002, they won 41 seats in 19 municipalities, in 14 of which they had not had any elected representatives before.

In October 2003, industrialist Christoph Blocher's Swiss People's Party, campaigning against asylum and the EU, emerged as the largest party in the Swiss lower house, with 26.6 percent of the vote. Blocher, who campaigned for a second seat on the seven member Swiss Bundesrat, or cabinet (traditionally, the Social Democrats, the Free Democrats, and the Christian Democrats have two seats each, with one seat for the next biggest party), was elected to the Swiss national cabinet in December 2003. Other parties expressing anti-immigration sentiments include the Swiss Democrats and the Swiss Party of Liberty.

In the Ukraine, three nationalist parties have just announced that they will unite to fight together in the presidential elections of next year, where they are expected to poll strongly.

Some of the most interesting developments on the European nationalist Right are taking place in the United Kingdom. After the implosion of the National Front in 1979, efforts at immigration control were made only through

a dwindling band of sincere, but relatively powerless, Conservative parliamentarians and the British National Party, founded in 1982 by John Tyndall, a former National Front chairman. The BNP struggled along futilely for years, hampered by a combination of media bias and unwise actions and statements by party officials. In 1993, the BNP got a councillor elected in London's East End, but lost the seat a few months later, after a vitriolic campaign against the party by everyone from the local Church of England bishop—who appeared to be delighted that his diocese had already been almost entirely emptied of English Christians in favour of Asian Muslims—down to crazed and hate-filled far leftists ready to kill to bring about the brotherhood of man. After this brief irruption, silence again until 2001 when, under a new chairman, Nick Griffin, they began to attract serious levels of support in urban areas, especially in northwest England. Then they got three local councillors elected in Burnley and, in May 2003, achieved a total of 17 councillors—down to sixteen when one had to be sacked for drunken violence—and then back up to 17, with a surprise win in Essex. Now, once again, they are down to 16, having just lost one of their seats in Yorkshire.

This incident of public drunkenness demonstrates that the BNP still has “housecleaning” to do. There are people in the party with serious criminal convictions. That these things happened many years ago and that other parties contain comparable people does not matter. In Britain, with its residual non-conformist mentality and endemic hypocrisy, such things are enormously important. A party that needs to begin to be seen as a victim of negative perceptions, and so appeal to the British sense of fair play, cannot afford to feed those perceptions. Because of the negative stereotyping that has taken place over many years, parties of the nationalist Right attract more than their fair share of eccentrics and psychopaths. Unpleasant people can be found in all parties, but when you are starting from a severe moral disadvantage, you should not give hostages to fortune. Whether the BNP has the sagacity to purge one or two people like these, and to screen all future candidates more carefully, remains to be seen. Nor should a practical political party be selling books with names like *World Plot Exposed*.

Internal party relations are also fractious, with whole branches of the party hardly speaking to Griffin or his allies. Many BNP members feel loyalty instead to previous leader John Tyndall, who is presently being expelled from the party he founded. Something else to consider is that the BNP councillors are unused to government, and will need to prove themselves to be efficient and honest if they are to be elected a second time.

But the BNP's recent achievements have galvanized political life and started to lift the BNP out of the political ghetto. There have been immediate benefits for the residents of areas where the BNP has polled well: The national government has avoided sending asylum seekers to areas where the BNP is strong. The government has even begun to make noises about asylum and

seems to be moving away from multiculturalism in favour of assimilation, with David Blunkett calling for English-language tests and Labour MPs decrying arranged marriages. The Eurosceptical United Kingdom Independence Party, which has three MEPs and 30 to 40 local councillors, is very concerned about the possible threat from the BNP, and has accordingly beefed up its immigration policies. The UKIP rejected out of hand a recent BNP suggestion that the parties should form an electoral pact for the European elections.

The Conservative hierarchy is still nervous about raising the immigration issue—and is in any case in a state of flux, having just elected a new leader—but many of its rank and file members and traditional supporters are becoming more and more interested in the BNP. Relations between activists of the two parties in certain areas—notably the northwest, east London, and parts of Essex—are very close, even amounting to *de facto* electoral pacts. In one area of the northwest, BNP and Conservative activists hold joint social meetings, and even help each other out leafleting on alternate nights. There is a good chance that the BNP will pick up one seat in the European Parliament in next year's elections; if so they have pledged to work with the Front National, Vlaams Blok, and anyone else willing to work with them.

Other interesting developments have been taking place in the West Midlands, where a new party, the Freedom Party, stood for the first time in May and won two seats (both won by the same person, Sharron Edwards). The Freedom Party aspires to be the first British populist party on the Right that avoids the mistakes that have bedeviled all similar parties, by offering a genuinely democratic party structure, with transparent accounting, respectable personnel, local roots, and sensible policies expressed in moderate language. Although at present they are the BNP's poor relation, it is not impossible that their modest gains will be longer lasting than those presently being enjoyed by the BNP.

With that quick *tour d'horizon* of the European Right, the next thing to consider is whether these multifarious parties could help each other more. At present, there is hardly any practical cooperation between these various parties. This is hardly surprising, given the very nature of nationalism, and that many European countries have historical grievances and territorial aspirations that are directly at odds with their counterpart parties in adjoining countries. These parties depend for their very existence on their national traditions, their knowledge of their respective peoples, and their particular prejudices. Although all of them share strong reservations about immigration, globalization, and the EU, apart from that they really have very little in common. What makes sense in Spain will not necessarily make sense in Slovakia or Serbia. Styles and terminology that are perfectly mainstream in Bratislava can sound very peculiar in Birmingham. And with the best will in the world, these small parties have limited resources and need to concentrate their efforts on domestic politics.

Some efforts have been made to develop and deepen such alliances – notably the Front National’s Euronat organization, by means of which 30 foreign delegations (including one from Japan) came to the FN’s last major rally in Nice. But the limitations of such aspirations were made abundantly clear to me some years ago, when attending the Front National’s Bleu Blanc Rouge festival in Paris. We were one of the foreign delegations, as were both the Greater Romania Party and the Hungarian Justice and Life Party. Some FN official had decided that the two parties’ respective stands would be situated adjacent to each other. It did not seem to have occurred to the official responsible that ultranationalist groups representing adjoining countries whose relations have been historically poisonous, and who both lay claim to the same territories, might not be especially good neighbors. Some years previously, there had been tension between some British National Party members and a couple of people from Sinn Fein, who had rather surprisingly attended the rally. The previous year, Serbian and Croat nationalists actually came to blows. This time, the Hungarians and Romanians contented themselves with ignoring each other – ensuring that when one group was at their table, the other delegation was not at theirs – interspersed with tense periods of glowering at one another from opposite ends of the marquee, muttering to themselves in Magyar or Romanian. Meanwhile, the Slovak delegation kept well away from both the Hungarians and the Romanians!

Historical grievances aside, there is a tendency for the more successful of these parties to distance themselves from their less successful neighbors who have suddenly become something of an embarrassment. The Front National used to look to the British National Front as an example, but then the tables were turned, and the FN – correctly in my view – hastily dropped the NF while the NF was going through its “political soldier” period of ultra-Catholicism and hero-worship of Libya’s Colonel Gadaffi.

The FN has been examining ways of broadening its international network, especially in the English-speaking world, with enthusiastic support from Jean-Michel Girard, its South African-born, English-speaking head of foreign affairs. There are plans to replace the Euronat organization with a wider organization, with its own website, English-language news service, and regular meetings. Such an initiative would incorporate pressure groups and publications as well as political parties.

Yet what may be more important in the short term than the FN’s well-meaning, if occasionally misplaced, efforts were the talks that took place late last year in Carinthia between Jörg Haider, the Vlaams Blok, and the Liga Nord. These talks were an attempt to broker an electoral pact for the European elections of 2004, in which, for the first time, voters will be able to vote for parties outside their countries on trans-national “lists.” The discussions were cordial, but have not yet produced any concrete results; yet the participants are still hopeful that a deal can be struck. What makes these negotiations so hopeful is

that those who are engaged in them are all politically pragmatic, and accordingly there will be no grandiose statements or schemes, merely quietly competent technical cooperation for a specific objective.

It would seem that the European nationalist Right is going to be around for a long time to come—occasionally feuding, occasionally facing electoral reversals, often failing to capitalize on opportunities through lack of imagination or lack of resources—but nonetheless a force to be reckoned with. For the moment, each of these parties will need to concentrate their efforts internally, trying to work with like-minded people at home while avoiding attacking their counterparts in other countries—acting locally while, hopefully, thinking globally. With participation in real politics and decision-making, and control of budgets, will come greater wisdom, greater credibility, and greater influence. Although change may not be as rapid or as far-reaching as many of us would like, it will come. What little these parties have so far achieved would have been inconceivable ten years ago. Despite their shortcomings, all of these parties, in their dramatically different ways, are helping to slow down what would otherwise have been an inexorable decline into extinction. Much that Europeans have loved will be lost along the way, but in time—and with luck—we will turn the tide.

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*Derek Turner is the editor of the British conservative magazine **Right Now!***

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