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Representation Gaps and Central European Populism

It is a common misconception that racism and xenophobia are to blame for the rise of populism in Europe, Julia Lakatos's analysis points to a double representation gap as an alternative explanation.



The most prevalent answer to the question of why far right/populist parties are mushrooming all over Europe is that it is because of widespread racist, xenophobic sentiments, especially due to immigration. In a recent essay in the Journal of Democracy however, Sheri Berman shows that these explanations are not grounded in evidence. There is no correlation between the levels of racism and xenophobia in a society and its support for right-wing populism. Berman points our attention to the actions of political parties and the state of party systems in Western Europe. She argues that while it is the job of parties and governments to respond to the needs of citizens, Western European governments have failed to react to the social and economic effects of migration. For a number of reasons, mainstream parties, in particular, center-left parties chose to remain silent on these issues. This created a “representation gap” in this issue between the mainstream parties and citizens, which the right-wing populist parties were more than happy to fill. The rise of these parties is not so much because of racism and xenophobia, but because they were the only parties that addressed the issue of migration. The representation gap is actually a telling sign about the erosion of social cohesion. That the fabric of society is unraveling, and the mechanisms that traditionally held it together no longer function the way they used to.

How could this representation gap arise? Following the 1990s, the center-left was defined no longer by economic policy, but by ideological, “cosmopolitan” or “culturally liberal” positions. Adopting a third-way or neoliberal position it had moved center-right in terms of economic policies leaving behind a left wing stance that generally preferred restrictive immigration in order to protect wages, unions etc. The platform of these parties became focused on being open to integration, multiculturalism, supporting LGBTQ rights and of course furthering European integration. All issues that were favored by educated, “cosmopolitan” elites, who happened to dominate these parties. The parties that were supposed to represent the working class became much more liberal culturally than their voting base. As Berman points out, this left people who were worried about immigration without mainstream parties to respond to their concerns. While it is true that originally right-wing populist parties voiced racist and xenophobic messages, as a result of the economic shift of center-left parties towards the center-right, right-wing populist parties decided to change their profile moving to the center, center-left on economic policy, criticizing globalization, vowing to protect the welfare state from immigrants, amongst others. France’s National Front (FN) is the prime example of this. The difference between Jean-Marie Le Pen’s FN and his daughter, Marine LePen’s National Rally explains how formerly racist, antisemitic parties have moved to

the center to champion those who in their view, have been left behind.

Berman's essay provides an adequate explanation for Western Europe, it fails however to address the question of Central Eastern European or Southern European countries. Countries that are perhaps the most active in the new European party family, the Patriots, who have just held their meeting in Madrid. For reasons having to do with history and political culture, these nations feel left behind by the Western European elite, the same way Western European voters have. As Andrej Babiš said at the meeting of the Patriots, "They tell us Europe will be competitive, yet they impose regulations that strangle businesses and citizens." These parties feel that the EU represents only the interests of those that go along with the policies of the European mainstream parties, which as we have seen spring from the perspectives of educated, cosmopolitan elites. The European representation gap is therefore not just one of highly educated, cosmopolitan elites versus the working class, but one between the West and the "rest". Those that cannot follow the Western trajectory of development are not seen as progressive, in some cases not even as democratic.

If we look specifically at the case of Hungary, concerning issues of migration, Hungary does not have the experiences or

infrastructure to handle immigration or illegal migration the way Western European countries do. Its history has created a highly homogenous country, which, due to its geopolitical position has always felt that it is the external bastion of the West, against different cultures and religions of the East. This, coupled with the fact that it has a difficult and unique language which it fears will disappear, has not made it open to immigration, even though in the past years the number of immigrants has continuously grown. While these numbers are much lower than in Western Europe, the country – like many other Central Eastern European countries – is faced by brain drain from Western Europe, causing further frustration among citizens who see not just that skilled labor is leaving the country but a demographic collapse as a result of aging populations and massive outmigration. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue that this leads to the fear that unassimilable foreigners will dilute the national identity and weaken social cohesion. This is an issue that neither the European mainstream, not the Hungarian centre-left parties have addressed so far, mainly because it does not fit culturally with their world view. (The new opposition party Tisza, with a leader that has formerly been close to the current governing party Fidesz has talked about creating incentives for young educated workers to return to Hungary.)



The key to understanding the rise of right-wing populism in Europe is to understand that there is not one but two representation gaps that need to be taken into consideration by the European mainstream. The challenge is not just to integrate those that they culturally aim to benefit, but those as well who feel left behind in this process. European pluralism means not just being tolerant of ethnic, racial, religious or lifestyle differences but to accept different trajectories of development as well. Sheri Berman's analysis shows that the Western European model has its own share of problems concerning social cohesion, yet it expects other countries to follow suit. The critical approach to the mainstream will continue as long as it fails to reflect on this issue and address its internal shortcomings.