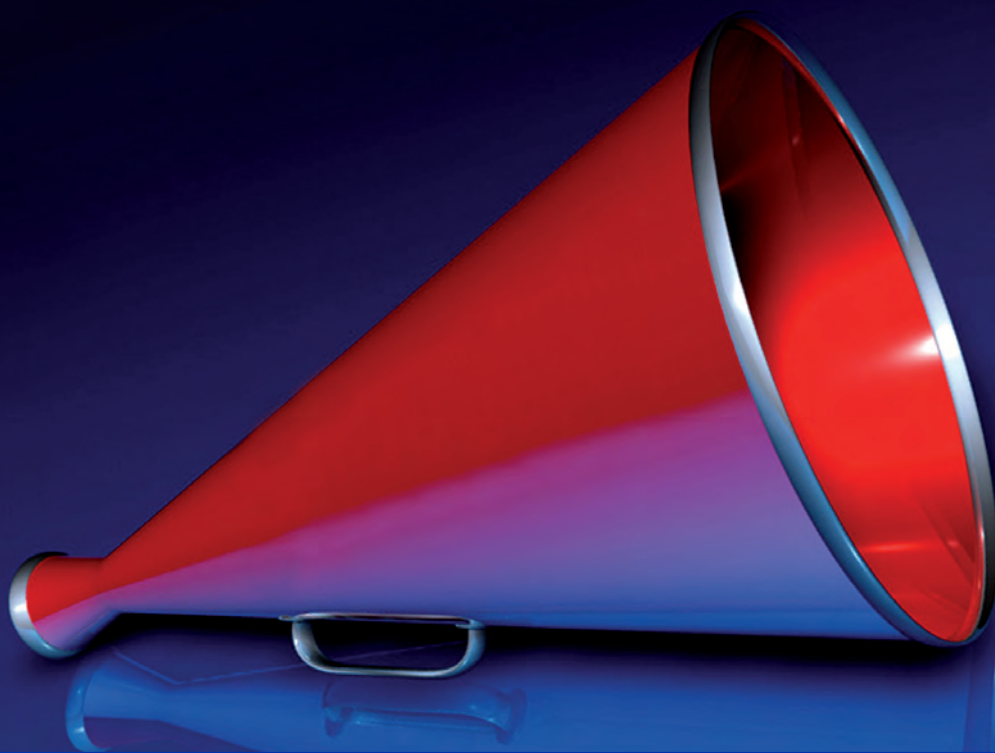


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European Populist Parties  
and Foreign Policy

Angelos-Stylianos Chryssogelos





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## CREDITS

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## Introduction

This research paper is about the foreign policy positions of five populist parties of the Right and Left in Western Europe. It focuses on foreign policy, an often ignored dimension of their ideas, classifies Far Left and Far Right parties together and emphasises their common character, something rarely done in academic literature and the press. Radical politics in Western Europe are usually associated with the Right rather than the Left, because populism has gained credence in European politics due to the actions and successes of right-wing leaders, with the result that the populist character of the radical Left is underestimated or overlooked. Here I assume that radical parties of the Right and Left express similar anxieties about and critiques of modern society, that they use populism in similar ways to advance their otherwise discredited philosophies and that those similarities are reflected in their foreign policy positions. This paper aims to fill a hole in policy debates by showing that European

populism poses a coherent threat to mainstream politics, that foreign policy can be instrumental to the challenge mounted by populist parties against centrist politics and that the impact of those positions is practical and real for European states and the European Union.

Populism<sup>1</sup> is defined as a thin-centred ideology, something more than a political style but less than a coherent and complex system of thought. It has also, appropriately, been defined as an empty shell, an ideological framework offering a few specific understandings and filled with more detailed ideological concepts according to the user. Authorities on the subject have identified the following main characteristics of populist parties:

1. a Manichaeian struggle between the elite and the people: populist parties defend the rights of the people to be protected from corrupt, insensitive, alienated elites;
2. an appeal to the notion of the heartland: populist parties define the people in unitary, exclusionary terms. Their 'us' is categorically different than any 'them' and they reinforce that distinction with the concept of a heartland, an emotionally charged vision of a time or place where the populist's people were sovereign, isolated from foreign influences;
3. the politics of the Stammtisch (the pub): populist parties offer easy solutions to complicated problems, usually by targeting guilty elites or social groups identified as accomplices in creating urgent problems; and
4. political entrepreneurship: The positions and strategies of populist parties are best understood as the

manoeuvrings of unprincipled, opportunistic politicians who are capable of controlling whole parties or movements. Analysis must conceptualize populist leaders as skilful tacticians.

Populism alone, however, is inadequate as a classifying criterion for any comparative study. Modern politics has become so media savvy that populism is now a fixture even of mainstream parties.<sup>2</sup> We are interested here in radical right-wing and left-wing parties whose stringent ideologies and strategic positions in national party systems make populism a welcome tactical addition. If the Far Right and the Far Left have populism as their empty shell, what they fill it with must be similar in order for them to be properly included in this paper.

Populism unites new radical parties of the Right and Left, but they have something more in common. Both are trying to update authoritarian, anti-pluralist, illiberal definitions of modern societies that, at least in theory, have been superseded by the ongoing modernisation of European societies. The oldest in that respect are the new radical right-wing parties. The Far Right seemed buried beneath the defeat of the Second World War and the rise of the New Left and its zeitgeist in the 1960s. But in the 1980s, the Far Right reinvented itself as the new radical Right. Authoritarian traditions of the Right were updated to meet the demands of social groups that felt threatened by modernisation, diversification, and the breakdown of traditional authorities. Nationalist, racist and ultraconservative ideologies of the past were redesigned to meet the challenges of new lifestyles and of globalisation and immigration. In sociological terms, as Europe entered the era of postmodern, pluralist societies, radical right-wing parties hung on to their failed vision of

unitary, modern societies defined in pre-modern terms based on ethnicity and race. Populism was a potent political weapon in that regard.<sup>3</sup>

After the fall of Communism, the Far Left was in disarray for about 10 years. At the beginning of this century, some Far Left parties adopted the Right's recipe for success, using populism, directed against neoliberal, transnational elites, to update their own unitary vision of modern society. Unlike the radical Right, which keeps pre-modern values alive by radicalising them, the populist Left keeps modern values of socialism and communism alive even though they failed as economic experiments. As a result, the populist Left presents a fresher and less menacing face than the populist Right. It supports the internationalism of anti-globalisation movements, and its call for social justice is inclusive, as opposed to the ethnic exclusion of the Right.<sup>4</sup> But the populist Left and Right do fundamentally the same thing: they keep alive and insinuate back into public discourse a vision of a non-liberal, non-differentiated society and a majoritarian democracy where 'the people' reigns supreme.<sup>5</sup> Just as the populist Right does, its leftist counterpart expresses the concerns of those who feel threatened by further modernisation and the breakdown of authority and certainties.<sup>6</sup>

The European populists, then, are unitarian and against processes of economic and social diversification and liberalisation. They are the heirs to the losers of modernisation battles, that is, the authoritarian pre-modern ideologies of the Right and the authoritarian modern ideologies of the Left. Their populism allows them to update their demands in step with those who fear globalisation, immigration, liberalised economies and mores, the opening up of trade and deregulation. By pointing to elites, they can mobilise their



predefined 'people' and maintain a sense of crisis. They may oppose aspects of modern society but they are not anti-modern per se.<sup>7</sup> They engage in modern politics as efficiently as anyone and their leaders are masters of the media game. On an ideological level, they have managed to embed their archaic ideologies into modern discourses. Right-wing populists have developed the ideology of 'ethnopluralism': they appropriate the postmodern call for respect for life choices and individuality and apply it to the demands of homogeneous ethnic groups that want to be 'left alone' from outside interference.<sup>8</sup> Left-wing populists have wholeheartedly supported global movements, appropriated their universalistic demands and embedded their socialist rhetoric within calls for global justice, transnational cooperation and new social values.<sup>9</sup> Where the populist Right uses ethnopluralism, the populist Left responds with a protectionist internationalism.

On a global level, the modern economy is structured around the nation state, the nature of which changes along with changes in the social order that has created it. By 'nature' I mean its tasks and capabilities, as well as the values attached to traits such as sovereignty and citizenship. The ongoing modernisation of Western societies has been projected onto the global scene through changes in the nature of the nation state. Economic modernisation tends to deprive the nation state more and more of its regulatory competences and makes borders increasingly porous. We refer to that phenomenon as globalisation. Social modernisation also changes the values associated with the rights to citizenship and sovereignty. Humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect are two examples of the new understanding of the nation state associated with the rise of postmodern values in Western societies.

Since they are critical of the modernising process in the domestic realm, populist parties are expected to take the same approach towards its international manifestations. Right-wing populists oppose the erosion of national sovereignty and the dilution of the ethno-nationalist character of the people. They fall back on a primitive modernist position that sees the nation state as a sacrosanct organising principle, even though they also subscribe to an ethnic, rather than the classical, civic definition of the people.<sup>10</sup> Left-wing populists oppose economic liberalisation and the erosion of borders and regulations that it brings. But that focus on sovereignty is complemented by an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist embrace of ethnocentric resistance, an updated version of the Cold War–era mix of Third World nationalism and First World leftist appropriation of nationalist and social struggles elsewhere. In other words, they are not anti-modern but alter-modern: they are principally internationalists, but their internationalism calls for a radical revision of existing institutional arrangements worldwide.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper I will look at the foreign policy positions of three populist right-wing parties and two populist left-wing parties. The following three right-wing parties have been chosen on the basis of their electoral relevance and success in bringing their views into the public debate: the French Front National (FN), the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ; Austrian Freedom Party) and Geert Wilders's Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands (PVV; Party for Freedom). Others that could be studied here are the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) and the Italian neo-fascists, both of which have been partners in their national governments. The populist Left type is not well developed yet. Germany's Die Linke (The Left) and the Dutch Socialistische Partij (SP; Socialist Party) are generally thought to be important representatives of this

kind of radical parties that have updated their profile through a populist discourse.<sup>12</sup> Both have been very successful in recent years, and could be a prototype for similar parties. The rise of Olivier Besancenot's Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (New Anti-Capitalist Party) in France is a case of the successful diffusion of the populist style in the Far Left.<sup>13</sup>

The choice of the parties raises two legitimate questions. One is the inclusion of Geert Wilders in the camp of the radical Right. He is definitely a populist, raging against elites at home and abroad. But is he a populist of the Left or the Right? Most would answer the question without hesitation: Wilders's anti-Muslim rampage, bordering on outright racism, makes him a feature of the extreme Right. Yet Wilders has distanced himself from racist groupings like the British National Party (BNP) and sees himself as the last bulwark against the multiculturalism that threatens such Western values as tolerance and acceptance of an open society. In that sense, he is not very different from numerous left-wing intellectuals who prefer to stick to the Left's fundamental universalism of democratic values. And his populist tactics allow him to take up leftist causes, as demonstrated by his objection to extending the retirement age during the election campaign of 2010. Also, the way in which Wilders espouses transnational politics is the antithesis of the radical Right, with its ongoing inability to create lasting institutions of international cooperation. It is more reminiscent of the Left's wholehearted support of international movements, NGOs and other such organisations.

Both in style and substance, then, Wilders cannot be easily classified with the rest of the authoritarian, pre-modern-inspired, ethnic-centred radical Right. What pushes him farthest to the right is the way he embeds modernist

ideas in a cultural and, in Huntington's sense, 'civilisational' discourse.<sup>14</sup> Since his populist heartland is a Netherlands with no immigrants, we can safely assume that his is a backward-looking, conservative vision. Wilders's culturally embedded vision of a postmodern, tolerant society resonates with the same audience that other radical right-wing parties seek to attract, people who feel threatened by economic and social modernisation. He also promotes a fundamentally unitary vision of society, since some would be excluded on cultural and religious grounds.

A second, valid, criticism concerns the exclusion from consideration in this paper of populist parties from the new EU Member States. The classification of parties here reflects a response to ongoing modernisation. In many ways, populist or radical parties in the new Member States spring from similar social developments as in Western Europe, but the pacing of change and the general social context are quite different in Central and Eastern Europe. There is definitely no shortage of authoritarian traditions, both nationalist and socialist, to inspire populists working against social differentiation. But those traditions have resulted from a different historical experience than in the West. In any case, non-inclusion of populist parties from Central and Eastern Europe does not imply absence of the phenomenon there. Right-wing populism in Poland and left-wing populism in Slovakia have been both pervasive and highly successful.<sup>15</sup>

The positions of the five parties will be tested in four concrete issue clusters:

1. transatlantic relations, including attitudes towards the US, ideas about security architecture in Europe and the role of NATO;

2. EU–Russia relations, including energy security, regional policy and the Russia–West security issues;
3. the Middle East question, an example of how foreign policy can be used to update an authoritarian outlook, knowingly or unknowingly. Here the emphasis will be on the relationship populist parties have with Israel and Arab political actors such as Hamas;
4. what populist parties have to say about the global economic and financial system, especially their positions on aid and development assistance. That will serve to round out the argument and identify the populist foreign policy profile. In the conclusions I will assess the significance of the findings for the Centre Right and formulate some policy proposals.

## United in Anti-Americanism: European Populism and Transatlantic Relations

Populism is an ideology that always tries to draw a line between the ‘people’ it professes to represent and certain ‘others’, guilty and distant. In the realm of foreign policy, the US is a natural candidate for such stigmatisation. The rise of populist parties of the Right took place during the 1990s, when the US was consolidating its position as the sole superpower. The rise of populist parties of the Left took place

in the period after the US-led ‘war on terror’ and amid a financial crisis largely identified with a US-inspired neoliberal economic model. Just like the EU, the US is associated with substantial dangers for national sovereignty.

The FN can be seen as the archetype of European radical right-wing anti-Americanism. It is a party shaped by the tradition of the French radical Right, which in light of the Second World War, the Vichy experience and post-war developments has maintained a deeply anti-Anglo-Saxon mindset. Anti-Americanism combines a strategic hostility to the idea of US influence in Europe with a cultural critique of US hegemony over European societies.<sup>16</sup> In many ways, the FN position can be seen as a crude version of the French yearning for independence in international affairs. Its view of the French position in the world and its distrust of US meddling in European politics are reminiscent of a primitive Gaullism, an unfettered will to have an independent France lead the rest of Europe. The FN constantly opposes important US foreign policy actions, and it calls for France’s exit from NATO. Jean-Marie Le Pen was very publicly against both Gulf Wars, in the second case supporting Saddam Hussein politically and personally. Much as domestic elites are portrayed as a kind of unholy alliance against the ‘indigenous’ French, Le Pen presents the US as an agent of a new internationalism that will see the end of the system of sovereignty and the ability of peoples, understood as culturally coherent communities, to further their interests.<sup>17</sup>

The FN demonstrates how populism allows old ideas—the authoritarian, militarist French Right, for example—to be updated as solutions to current problems such as the architecture of European and international security. But political entrepreneurship also plays a substantial role in the

process. As heir to the Austrian pan-Germanic movement and Teutonic liberalism,<sup>18</sup> one would expect Austria's FPÖ to stress independence for Austrian foreign policy, as institutionalised in the country's traditional post-war neutrality. But throughout his rise in the 1980s and 1990s, FPÖ leader Jörg Haider was a mild but visible proponent of Austria's accession to NATO. One can interpret that in light of tactical, ideological and international factors. First, a stance in favour of NATO membership emphasised Haider's outsider and modernising status. Second, Haider used his populism to distil different messages from the FPÖ's ideological baggage: Germanic nationalism was used to inflate Austria's need for security, not its traditional neutrality. Third, and related to the above, NATO expansion saw the traditional 'others' of Austro-German nationalism, Poland and the Czech Republic, join NATO while Austria was left out. Domestic and international factors combined to push Haider into a pro-NATO position.<sup>19</sup>

By the time Haider's FPÖ joined the now-famous Schüssel coalition in 2000, it was a foregone conclusion that the issue of NATO membership would be placed on the new government's agenda. The country could then split on the issue along clear right-left lines.<sup>20</sup> But Haider's keen populist instincts brought about a reversal in FPÖ positions. The war in Iraq offered Haider an opportunity to boost his international profile. Being confined to the role of governor of Carinthia, Haider made up for the attendant lack of exposure by staging high-profile meetings with Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein. His discourse shifted to an anti-interventionist anti-Americanism. At a time when his party's popularity was flagging, riding the anti-war mood seemed like a good idea.<sup>21</sup>

The Haider-less FPÖ under the leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache has been re-founded on the basis of the

national-liberal Germanic legacy imposed by Haider but minus his curmudgeonly populism.<sup>22</sup> Strache's populism overemphasises Austria's neutrality—and is thus anti-NATO—and the country's ability to conduct its own foreign policy. On a European level, that means hard line Euro-scepticism; in the global context, anti-US feelings.<sup>23</sup> Under Strache, the FPÖ has moved its foreign policy positions close to the pattern of the FN: anti-elite populism, which in the global context means anti-US, reinvigorating old ideological traditions by taking stands on new problems of sovereignty and global affairs.<sup>24</sup>

The case of the Dutch PVV is quite different than that of the FN and FPÖ. Unlike the FN, Geert Wilders has a very thin tradition to draw on. Extremist ideologies have been conspicuously weak in the Netherlands. If there is a tradition that informs Wilders's politics, it is the short political stint—no more than two years—of Pim Fortuyn. Unlike the FPÖ and even more than the FN, the PVV is a perfect creation of its master, the child of Geert Wilders and no one else. The party's views on foreign policy are effectively his and changes of policy are as likely as changes of mind. Following in Fortuyn's footsteps, Wilders's populism is primarily directed against Muslim immigrants, Islam in general and proponents of multiculturalism in the Netherlands and Europe. His views, a mix of political ideas and personal obsessions, can best be described as a clash of civilisations on amphetamines, a Manichaeian struggle between the democratic West and the Islamo-fascist rest. His ideas are the mirror image of the preoccupations of other populist right-wing parties. If the world is seen as the sum of different 'civilisational' sovereignties, Wilders is a fanatic supporter of the West and, in this sense, can also be considered an Atlanticist.



But Wilders's nationalism and parochial chauvinism make the best of these internationalist leanings. As in other populist right-wing parties, his focus is indisputably national. As he is against Europe, he is also against the Dutch deployment in Afghanistan. Between 'security abroad' and 'security at home', he unequivocally chooses the latter. He calls for the Netherlands to become more selective in its troop commitments and is against the UN because it is dominated by Muslim countries.<sup>25</sup> Those policy proposals could be either Atlanticist or anti-Atlanticist. Clearly Wilders's mindset would be more at home with elements of the previous US administration. One can speculate that the new US efforts for Middle East peace will not meet with Wilders's approval. The lack of a robust Far Right nationalist tradition keeps the PVV from joining other populist Right parties in a clear anti-Americanism.

Moving to the populist Left, we find a pretty much unequivocal anti-Americanism in Germany's Die Linke and the Dutch SP. Whereas the populist Right's anti-Americanism is guided by its ethnopluralism, the populist Left's anti-Americanism is driven by its specific idea of internationalism, a mix of anti-capitalist movements, activism and nationalist protectionism. Both dictate an aversion to the US and to a global economic system characterised by neoliberalism, unfairness and structural imbalances between rich and poor. Whereas the populist Right sees the US as a menace to the political, social and cultural independence of a threatened national community, the populist Left sees the US as a menace to the economic standing of a threatened working class, defined more broadly than industrial labour.<sup>26</sup> Yet especially for the populist Left, thanks to anti-Americanism, the link can be made more easily between domestic and international economic elites as targets of its critique. The

underlying factor for the anti-Americanism of the new populist Left is its own ideological heritage. Left-wing populism seeks to update radical socialist and communist ideas and reinvigorate them within the public debate.

Die Linke calls for the dissolution of NATO and the creation of a pan-European security system that includes Russia. NATO is seen as an aggressive alliance bent on US expansion and domination. It is also seen as an impediment to peace in Europe and the world. The EU is urged to dissociate itself from NATO, become a civil power in world politics and rely for its security on good relations with Russia and the strengthening of the UN.<sup>27</sup> Die Linke as well as the SP have been ardent opponents of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, putting them at the extreme of their party systems on foreign policy. Die Linke was the only parliamentary group to solidly reject the extension of the Bundeswehr mandate in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> The SP opposed the extension of the Dutch deployment in Uruzgan during the cabinet crisis that brought the last Balkenende government down in February 2010. Yet some differences in nuance exist between the two parties on NATO. Whereas Die Linke unequivocally favours dismantling NATO, the SP calls only for reconsideration of Dutch membership on the understanding that one must take into account the future role of NATO as the military arm of rich Western countries.<sup>29</sup> The party opposes the reform of NATO into a global military arm of the US and wants to put the alliance under stricter UN control, with any reform subject to parliamentary approval in the Netherlands.<sup>30</sup>

The populist Left's anti-Americanism is supplemented by a radical internationalism, calling for the reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions, reliance on the UN for all matters related to war and peace and the rejection of all clubs, such as the

G-7 and G-20, that deny participation to poorer members of the international community.<sup>31</sup> Die Linke and the SP are multilateralist, but their internationalism essentially calls for eliminating the existing global system of institutions.<sup>32</sup> The US is most identified with that system of closed security and financial clubs, unfair international institutions, war, humanitarian interventions and injustice.<sup>33</sup>

In updating previous Marxist, socialist and communist critiques, Die Linke and the SP present NATO as the instrument of an unjust international order. Much like the populist Right, the populist Left's fall-back position is the defence of the classical sovereign nation state. The populist Left is profoundly uncomfortable with globalisation and US dominance of a process that threatens to dissolve borders.

## Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Bear? Russia and European Populism

Much like their views about the US, populist parties' views about Russia and its relation with Europe start from very different assumptions before converging on common ground: European populist parties of the Right and Left promote a cosy relationship between the EU and Russia; play down issues of human rights and democracy; see Russia as a strategic asset for Europe, implying that it could replace the US as an ally; and highlight Russia's advantages, such as its energy sources. As with the US, European populism's

relationship with Russia is shaped by a few decisive factors: the ideological tradition that informs each party; the vision shared by all populists of an international society of distinct, sovereign states; and the vision implicitly promoted of domestic politics as a polity of unified, undifferentiated, entitled people.

During the Russia–Georgia war in the summer of 2008 the populist Left and Right were united in their condemnation of Georgian ‘aggression’ and defended Russian actions as lawful defence.<sup>34</sup> In the European Parliament debate, Die Linke MEPs tabled a draft resolution, notable for its pro-Russia language, against the joint resolution of all other significant party groups.<sup>35</sup> The SP was generally perceived as the most pro-Russia party in discussions in the Dutch parliament as well.<sup>36</sup> European populist parties do not see Russia as a threat, neither in geopolitical nor in ideological terms. If anything, they seem to view it as more of a friend, or less of a threat, than the US.<sup>37</sup> The main mantra of European populist parties is that Russia should not be provoked and that it is indispensable for European security. Their positions on the stationing of a US missile base and radar in Poland and the Czech Republic demonstrate the same approach. Populist parties decried what they saw as an imperialist plan aimed at drawing Eastern Europe into the American sphere and creating animosity between the West and Russia.<sup>38</sup> Populist parties are similarly pro-Russia on the issue of energy security. Ukraine is seen more as an impediment to Europe’s ability to talk directly to Russia on energy issues than as a potential asset through, say, EU or NATO membership.<sup>39</sup>

Examining populist parties’ attitudes towards Russia, one can see that their populism, directed against any effort to

dilute national sovereignty, shapes and is informed by their ideological traditions. For the FN, Russia is an invaluable asset in Europe's effort to become a power in the global system, albeit one that retains its essential intergovernmental features. That position implicitly shows the FN's preference for Russia as opposed to the US as a partner in global affairs or to Turkey as a potential new member of the EU. Russia's Christian and cultural roots are particularly valued, while questions of human rights and democracy are sidelined.<sup>40</sup> Justifying his approval of the EU–Russia modernisation agreement, Jean-Marie Le Pen stated that it is hypocritical to raise doubts about Russia today when the European Left favoured Gorbachev's concepts of European cooperation in the early 1990s.<sup>41</sup> In its Russia policy as in its attitude towards the US, the FN is reminiscent of a crude Gaullism, a classical vision of an adversarial state-centric system in which European states can form a partnership with Russia that will balance the US on a global scale. As a nationalist, Le Pen is calling for a continuation of France's traditional approach to Russia as a counterbalance both to the US and Germany.<sup>42</sup>

The FPÖ also has a pronounced pro-Russia platform. For one thing, Russia is an attractive push lever on the FPÖ's most pronounced adversaries, the post-Habsburg Central European states.<sup>43</sup> One cannot help but make the connection between the FPÖ's pro-Russia attitude and its pan-Germanic nationalism and traditional Austrian liberalism, ideological currents with a historical love–hate relationship with Russia. As with the FN, FPÖ populism essentially updates its authoritarian heritage with a vision of Europe–Russia relations based on crude material interests and intergovernmental negotiations. The FPÖ was freed to develop those ideological positions thanks to Haider's exit from the party. As recently as

the summer of 2008, Haider had questioned the extent to which Russia belongs to Europe, reflecting his more acute and nuanced populism.<sup>44</sup>

More interesting are the positions of Die Linke, a party that unites leftist Social Democrats and trade unionists with heirs of the old GDR regime. The party's positions on EU–Russia relations read like a throwback to early 1950s German Social Democratic Party (SPD) positions on European security. The dissolution of NATO is supposed to make way for an overall European security organisation that will include Russia. Until then, the OSCE remains the preferred forum for the discussion of security matters between Russia and the rest of Europe.<sup>45</sup> Die Linke generally sees Europe as unnecessarily provoking Russia on a range of issues, something that puts European peace in danger.<sup>46</sup> What is interesting here is the party's position on domestic Russian politics. Even though it nominally supports the Russian Communist Party, it accepts the current leadership in Moscow as a group it can 'do business with'.<sup>47</sup>

To sum up, European populism's positions on Russia bring back memories of the eclectic coalition that supported Cold War détente between the 1950s and 1970s, comprising French Gaullists, German social democrats and liberals of a nationalistic predisposition, and Communists from many different countries. The connecting thread of that coalition was a vision of a united but intergovernmental Europe with its separate nation states, emancipated from America and more closely aligned with Russia. Interestingly, many of the supporters of European détente within the new politics movements of the time moved on to mainstream politics, representing the Russia-sceptic centre of European politics today. The vision of Austro-German nationalists, French authoritarian rightists and German post-Communists as the

sole advocates of an unequivocal pro-Russia position not only highlights current populism's effort to maintain the relevance of authoritarian ideologies in the postmodern era, but also is an interesting reminder of the more complex nature of a seemingly innocent and worthy concept such as détente.<sup>48</sup>

## Walking a Thin Line: European Populism and the Middle East Conflict

As indirect heirs to authoritarian political traditions, European populist parties come under particular scrutiny with regard to their position on the Middle East conflict, given the implied attitude towards Israel and their attitude towards Jews in general that such positions betray. Since the Second World War, anti-Semitism has been eliminated, nominally at least, from mainstream European politics and associated with Far Right parties. Over the same period, anti-Zionism has gained credibility as a result of Israel's conflict with the Palestinians and the constant hostility towards Israel shown by Communist parties. As a result, the extremes of the political spectrum are now fruitful grounds for anti-Israel, anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic voices and opinions.<sup>49</sup> Leftists especially would vehemently disagree with that, but the fact is their extremist views on Israel offer cover for more sinister approaches.<sup>50</sup>

Jean-Marie Le Pen's anti-Semitism is no secret.<sup>51</sup> The FN reflects its founder's unease with Jews, making the party the most genuine continuation of the French Far Right reactionary tradition that has always been close to other anti-Semitic positions. Extreme Catholics, anti-revolutionaries, Vichyists and nationalists meet in the ranks of the FN. The FN has expanded largely thanks to its leader's appeal to poor urban classes, making it an ideal environment for the nurturing and expression of anti-Semitism. The Palestinian issue is yet another way to update the Far Right's anti-Semitism for today's era of the 24-hour news cycle, complete with sensationalist video footage. At the same time, support of the seemingly weaker side in the Israel–Palestinian conflict adds to the aura of martyrdom that populist leaders prefer for themselves and project onto their followers. In practice, the FN sides with Palestinians: in January 2009 Le Pen called Gaza 'a real ghetto, a concentration camp'. He also denies the characterisation of Hamas as a terrorist organisation and decries the hypocrisy of those who would treat a popular political force as a pariah. The FN believes the West adopts two-faced policies towards Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>52</sup> In the recent Israeli commando attack on a convoy of ships carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza, the FN sided with Muslim organisations against Israel, but only after qualifying that stance with reference to Turkey's sponsorship of 'martyrdom'.<sup>53</sup> The party's populism, it seems, forces it to balance between its proclivity for anti-Semitism and its alarm about the 'Muslim peril' inside France.

The FPÖ has had an equally controversial relationship with anti-Semitism, especially after Jörg Haider rose to leadership in the mid-1980s. In a country where Holocaust denial is a crime, Haider started making headlines precisely by inviting allegations of anti-Semitism.<sup>54</sup> His personal



background may explain many of his positions: his family was deeply involved in pro-Nazi factions of the Austro-German nationalist movement. The FPÖ itself represented that political space, albeit in an uneasy alliance with liberal, anti-socialist and anti-clericalist elements.<sup>55</sup> Haider's expulsion from the FPÖ deprived the party of its most acute and able politician, but his ideological positions proved much stickier. Today the FPÖ maintains essentially anti-Israel positions on the Middle East issue, calling for the creation of a Palestinian state while condemning Israel's aggressive actions and breaches of international law.<sup>56</sup> The FPÖ today is the most visible anti-Israel rallying point in Austrian politics. Given the country's history, that in itself is a matter of controversy. During the European election campaign in 2009, the FPÖ opposed potential EU membership for Israel, while every other parliamentary party, including the BZÖ (Alliance for the Future of Austria, the party Haider founded after he left the FPÖ), called on the FPÖ leader to apologise for his positions in a special debate in the Nationalrat.<sup>57</sup>

Once again, Geert Wilders's opinion on the issue stands out among right-wing populist parties. For Wilders, Israel is a beacon of democracy and Western values in a region characterised by violence, authoritarian regimes and religious fundamentalism. Wilders's support for Israel seems even more principled and unconditional than it is for the US. In his world view, Israel clearly belongs to the camp of the democratic, enlightened West. Wilders is fighting his anti-Muslim war through the Palestinian issue as well.<sup>58</sup>

The Netherlands has been no more immune than other countries to anti-Semitism, a story powerfully presented in Ian Buruma's book *Murder in Amsterdam*.<sup>59</sup> After the war, regret over Dutch complicity during the Nazi occupation mingled with

the enlightened tradition that had allowed the Dutch republic to become a haven for Jews from all over Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That mix of regret and a tolerant self-image made support for Israel an integral part of political correctness and crucial to the Dutch ruling class after the war. It was further reinforced by the advent of new social values and norms after the 1960s. In the current context, the issue of Muslim integration into Dutch society creates a volatile mix with that self-image. The Nazi experience led most Dutch leaders to see immigration and multiculturalism as fulfilling part of the country's responsibility towards people in need. The Netherlands has been one of the most pro-Israel European states while practising a policy of cultural accommodation. The two seemed to fit neatly with the Dutch value of tolerance.

The factual or perceived crisis of Muslim integration became the catalyst for the rise of a nationalist Right preaching social tolerance and freedom of speech. It was embodied in Pim Fortuyn and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who presented Islam as a threat to social tolerance and freedom. Wilders lacks both Fortuyn's and Ali's intellectual charisma, but he has managed to make their ideological mix a winning electoral formula. Defence of Israel is just one of the many progressive values of Dutch society that Wilders wants to portray as being under attack by Muslims at home. He appropriates Dutch responsibility for Jewish suffering by reversing it against the elites that hitherto used it. This is another example of Wilders's potent postmodern populism, especially if one considers that defence of Israel and attacks on multiculturalism also have deep roots in the mainstream Left. Yet it reflects Wilders's prejudices against Muslims as essentially incapable of taking part in democracy and liberal society, so it serves the goal of social exclusion, much like the anti-Zionism of the other populist parties studied here.

Moving to the left, we also encounter anti-Israel positions from Die Linke and the SP. Their position is particularly interesting because of their national context. The SP functions in the generally pro-Israel Netherlands. Die Linke promotes its anti-Israel views in a country where the political elite have shied away for some time from direct criticism of Israel. Their positions are even more interesting in light of the fact that the Left dismisses charges of anti-Semitism and generally presents more nuanced positions on the Palestinian issue.

The SP is generally in line with Palestinian demands: it seeks implementation of all Security Council resolutions on the issue, as well as the ICJ ruling on the West Bank wall. It rejects the boycott of the democratically elected Hamas government in Gaza. It supports renegade Israeli scientist Mordechai Vanunu and is in favour of a nuclear-free Middle East. It has also condemned the disproportionate use of force by Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War.<sup>60</sup> It proposes that if Israel does not stop building illegal settlements in the West Bank, the Netherlands should pressure the EU to revise its association agreement with Israel.<sup>61</sup> In the recent controversy over Israel seizing the pro-Palestinian convoy in the Mediterranean, the SP claimed that Israel had to answer to the UN, and along with other left-wing parties in parliament considered the possibility of EU sanctions.<sup>62</sup> As a result of the fear of anti-Semitism in Germany, Die Linke has attracted controversy for its anti-Israel positions. The party does not accept that it is anti-Semitic, of course. It points to issues of democracy, peace and justice, trying to place its positions within a leftist, secular discourse reminiscent of the heyday of Eastern Bloc support for left-wing nationalist movements in the Third World.<sup>63</sup> Israel is accused of violations of international and humanitarian law, of collective punishment of the Palestinians and of receiving favoured treatment from the US and the EU.<sup>64</sup>

Extreme left-wing parties dismiss accusations of anti-Semitism more convincingly than do extreme right-wing ones, but the Left does not seem willing to disengage from the extreme anti-globalisation elements that flirt with anti-Semitic semantics and symbols,<sup>65</sup> since association with those elements provides the Far Left with organisational support and ideological renewal. Within that context, Die Linke's position remains problematic. Being the sole openly populist party in the German Bundestag, the party's anti-Israel position serves as yet another factor differentiating it from mainstream 'elitist' parties. Theoretically, the entry of Die Linke into the mainstream could tame its anti-Israel position. It would be hard to imagine a red-green coalition in Berlin relying on Die Linke without the latter tempering some of its positions. But it also remains a legitimate question whether Die Linke's rise will bring radicalised ideas on Israel into the mainstream Centre Left.

## **A Better World begins... Where? European Populism, Aid and Development Assistance**

International aid and development assistance feature more prominently in the platforms of left-wing than right-wing populist parties. Left-wing parties profess a specific kind of internationalism, based in civil society when it involves cooperation between like-minded people in the West but

intergovernmental when it involves cooperation between the West and the global South. For the latter, the rule of national sovereignty is to be respected. Representative forums like the UN should manage international cooperation. Populist left-wing parties formulate elaborate and high-profile suggestions for the architecture of the global system.<sup>66</sup> Populist right-wing parties generally seem uncomfortable discussing issues of global concern. Their focus is national or at most Eurocentric and Western.

What is particularly interesting about populist right-wing parties is that when it comes to aid and international development cooperation, they show a willingness to go along with the economic orthodoxy associated with globalisation. All populist parties of the Right studied here are reticent about direct aid; they do not like the idea of states giving away money to far-off countries where mismanagement and corruption is rife. Most recently the FPÖ was the only party in the Austrian parliament to oppose a further increase in aid towards Africa as well as Austrian participation in the Asian Development Bank.<sup>67</sup> In coalition negotiations after the Dutch election, the PVV pursued a complete scrapping of aid, as opposed to a liberal proposal to halve the aid budget and the Christian Democrats' willingness to maintain current levels.<sup>68</sup> In the end the VVD-CDA coalition supported by the PVV agreed to a modest reduction that would maintain aid expenditure at 0.7% of national GDP.<sup>69</sup> It is interesting that populist right-wing parties do not see aid as a way to encourage poor people to stay at home rather than emigrating to Europe.<sup>70</sup>

The FPÖ and the PVV see the solution to global imbalances in more trade and openness in the global economy: Trade Not Aid.<sup>71</sup> The position of the FN is different.

In a debate in the European Parliament, Marine Le Pen castigated free trade for its effects on the European economy and spoke of 'unfair competition from low-wage countries'. Nonetheless she defended what she called fair trade.<sup>72</sup> That may reflect traditional French dirigiste and anti-globalisation approaches and the party's intimate links with farmers. Still, the overall approach is clear. In the global context, populist right-wing parties are clearly exclusionist: they expect the global South to compete in the international arena without any safety valves such as immigration or reform of global institutions.<sup>73</sup> That is an example of ethnopluralism gone global, a populism that defends the people from not only domestic but also international elites trying to snatch their money for dubious global causes.<sup>74</sup>

The peculiar thing is how populist parties of the Right have a leftist discourse in domestic economic issues<sup>75</sup> but a neoliberal one in international economic issues like aid. In the case of the FN and the FPÖ/BZÖ, one could say that they tap into their earlier days of the 1980s, when they were representing an anti-tax, neoliberal economic populism that mixed well with their anti-communism and anti-welfarism.<sup>76</sup> The case of international aid is yet more evidence of the resourcefulness of populism and its ability to mesh separate ideological points whenever the need arises. In short, populist parties of the Right are protectionist and anti-globalisation when it comes to competition among developed economies, but open and neoliberal when it comes to aid to poorer parts of the world.

Populist parties of the Left read the situation differently. A renewed and active approach to global imbalances was imperative for parties whose core ideology—communism—had fallen into disrepute. Populist left-wing parties tried to

position themselves instead within the wider anti- and alter-globalisation movements and the postmodern politics of NGOs, the environmental movement and so on. An active approach to the global economic system is an integral part of their modernised populist face, because it allows them to mount attacks on capitalism from a new base.<sup>77</sup> Clearly, international imbalances are pervasive in the global economy. Populist left-wing parties use the fact of such imbalances to complement their protectionism at home with a new internationalism, thus updating their anti-capitalist critique without seeming nationalist. The populist Left is thus not opposed to globalisation and transnational economic cooperation per se; it opposes the specific global constellation existing today. It promotes an international economy based on protecting the poor, taxing the rich and global solidarity in general.<sup>78</sup>

International economic matters take up a large part of the programmes of populist left-wing parties. The SP has a long and exhaustive policy proposal on the architecture of the global economy. An increase in international aid from the West to the global South is ardently promoted. Rich countries are urged to dilute their criteria for aid and move from good governance to good-enough governance. The SP promotes the reform and democratisation of global financial institutions, calling, for instance, for the end of the customary appointment of a European to head the IMF and an American to head the World Bank, and for the UN to increase its leverage over these institutions. As opposed to the populist right-wing parties, the SP understands an open trade regime as allowing poorer countries to be protected from Western competition while exporting their products for fair prices. The party is strongly opposed to EU agricultural subsidies, as well as any measures by rich countries to subsidise trade. Global

poverty is targeted, as are environmental concerns. In general, the SP seems to advance a development path for the global South that will combine traditional and modern economic structures based on home-grown initiatives and consultation with local actors, as opposed to imposition of technocratic solutions from international institutions.<sup>79</sup>

Die Linke also has an active international programme. The German populists follow broadly the same pattern as the SP does. They promote a radical overhaul of the institutional architecture of the global economy in favour of a system that is more representative, they condemn global poverty and exploitation of the South by wealthy nations, they blame global neoliberal models for today's situation and they propose straightforward solutions: increasing aid to poor countries in line with the 0.7% target, abolishing Third World debt, promoting agriculture in developing countries targeted at food independence, protection from European and US competition, fair trade instead of free trade, no bilateral trade agreements between the EU and poor countries, targeted policies for environment and development goals, abolishing the TRIPS agreement and democratising the WTO.<sup>80</sup> In March 2010 the party voted along with the SPD and the Greens against the new development cooperation budget of the Centre Right government, which it deemed insufficient. Party member Movassat called it criminal for Germany not to achieve the 0.7% goal.<sup>81</sup>



## Conclusion: the Challenge of Populism and the Centre Right Response

The foreign policy ideas of European populist parties reveal their analogous nature. Populist parties of the Right and Left are characterised by a common style, an ability to adapt to different political circumstances and a common desire to paint a picture of fundamental differences between them and the mainstream parties. They share a profound unease over the ongoing process of economic and social modernisation in Europe. They seek to update authoritarian ideologies of the past that view societies as unitary in ethnic or class terms and are opposed to the continuing social and economic differentiation of the postmodern era. In other words, even though their positions are at polar opposites, populist parties of the Left and Right in fact form one end of the fundamental cleavage of European politics today, pitted against parties that see society as differentiated and diverse rather than unitary and concrete. The study of foreign policy indicates this similarity in outlook.

Populist parties see the world as the sum of sovereign nation states. For right-wing populists, sovereignty is about the independence of the undifferentiated ethnic community from outside influences and the work of transnational elites. For left-wing populists, sovereignty is about the independence of the undifferentiated working classes from transnational financial elites, as well as the independence of the global South from neoliberal financial institutions. All populist parties position themselves on international issues in accordance with the mantra of ethnic or national independence. Just as they worry about the dilution of

domestic societies, they worry about the dilution of the principle of national sovereignty. Put simply, as the world turns postmodern, populist parties representing pre-modern or failed modern projects fall back on the defence of crudely formulated, classical modern principles.

It may sound as if populist parties are condemned to be overtaken by the rush of history and evolution, but that is far from true. They represent one more expression of postmodern politics. They may not ascribe in principle to the forces that shape modernity, but they are capable of adapting to it. They espouse public debate and the democratic process, they engage with new societal problems, they use the media as well as or better than most. Foreign policy is a case in point. Despite representing old and apparently failed ideological traditions, populist parties actively formulate opinions on pressing global issues such as European security, global institutional architecture and international trade. Populism allows them to offer simplistic solutions while keeping their ideological traditions up-to-date with issues of broader concern.

In practical terms, positions on foreign policy are an often overlooked but important aspect of populist politics. Positions on transatlantic relations, Russia and the architecture of European security keep alive a simplistic, *détente*-minded tradition that overlooks important changes in the European continent. Populist parties could superficially seem in favour of a political and independent Europe, and thus seem pro-European in general. They conveniently overlook the EU's institutional nature and, perhaps consciously, silence the fact that if the EU ceases to be a normative and civil power in world politics, its foreign policy capability will be taken over by the policies of individual Member States.

Populist positions on the Palestinian issue keep alive a fundamentally anti-Israel discourse that threatens to degenerate into covert anti-Semitism. The complicity of the parties is not always intentional: left-wing populist parties are sensitive to charges of anti-Semitism, and Geert Wilders is an ardent supporter of Israel. But postmodern politics has its price: official discourse, however balanced, is subject to debate and re-appropriation. An anti-Israel position—or a culturally defined pro-Israel, anti-Muslim one—is irresponsible in light of the potential for such opinions to be distorted by the media. Finally, the populist mindset has a clear idea of what the world should look like. Right-wing populists defend the sovereignty of rich countries; left-wing populists do the same for poor ones. Together they oppose a transnational, integrated economy and promote protectionism and closed borders. That carries a highly symbolic value and could grow in importance in the future.

The foreign policy positions of populist parties create specific challenges for Centre Right and mainstream politics. European populism forces parties of the Centre Right and Centre Left to maintain a defensive position on foreign policy, an issue that has traditionally been the privileged field of governing parties. Populist parties relentlessly promote the demonisation of international elites. The politicisation of foreign policy affects the general standing and the credibility of mainstream parties, as populists seem to be able to create a simplistic but coherent vision not only of unitarian national societies but also of a world functioning according to their premises.

For the Centre Right, the foreign policies of populists pose political, ideological and electoral challenges. After the Second World War, the osmosis of Christian Democratic and

conservative ideas in Europe created a highly successful electoral and ideological formula that allowed the emergence of a robust and potent Centre Right. The mix has been successfully exported to most countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well. It was based on the intermingling of the ideas of free enterprise and social justice, respect for traditional values, defence of human rights and endorsement of economic and social progress and responsibility. The European Centre Right's ideas were also powerfully expressed in European unification, transatlantic cooperation and careful promotion of liberal values worldwide.

The radical Right challenges the Centre Right by allowing an authoritarian current of the Right to play a role in ideological and electoral politics. In the populist Right's ideas, we can detect elements of ideologies that the Centre Right had managed to banish not only from its own body but also for some time from public discourse: chauvinism, secular or religious anti-Semitism, international realpolitik, and so on. By casting doubt on the main international achievements of the European Centre Right, right-wing populists threaten to force a revision of the Centre Right's overall approach to social and economic modernisation. The Centre Right has generally been successful. It remains the biggest political force in the European Commission and the European Parliament even after enlargement. The danger is that the successes of right-wing populists will force the Centre Right to backtrack on some international commitments and worse, revise its domestic policies as well. The Centre Left also faces a serious predicament, as it is being challenged on issues of social justice, regulation and environmental protection by the populist Left's radical internationalism.

Critics of the Centre Right point to accommodations it has made with the populist Right. But the Centre Right has managed to maintain a much more principled position on the international front than has the embattled Centre Left. Despite the popularity of Euro-scepticism, anti-Americanism and isolationism, the Centre Right still clings to its support of the European project, the need to face up to international terrorism practically and conceptually and the effort to keep values and human rights relevant in inter-state affairs, for example with Russia. That is commendable. The Centre Left flirts, under pressure from its populists, with ideas of a radical transformation of the international system, accommodation of an ever-autocratic Russia and harsh criticism of Israel, none of which bodes well for its commitments to liberal democracy and a liberal economic model. Until now, the Centre Right has withstood the temptation pretty well. Its commitment must remain unwavering.

A threat that is usually overlooked is the rise of the populist Left itself. Whereas it practises a politics of moderate opposition to or reserved cooperation with the Centre Left and attempts to isolate or co-opt the radical Right, aiming to moderate its themes, the Centre Right cannot but reject outright the populist Left. Despite its sometimes appealingly fresh tactics and its self-serving indignation about charges of illiberalism, anti-Semitism and so on, the populist Left is an opponent the Centre Right needs to confront head-on. That is an even bigger challenge in the field of foreign policy because by virtue of its origins and organisation, the populist Left highlights and appropriates issues such as the environment, global justice, aid, war and peace, and regional conflicts.

The rise of the populist Left shows that although the Cold War ended abroad, it is still being fought at home. By endorsing new internationalist causes, the populist Left reopens divisions over foreign policy that were once kept alive by the Western European Communist parties. The goal is the same now as then: to project leftist unitarian values from the international to the domestic sphere. The populist Left's foreign policy has powerful and upsetting domestic counterparts. Its anti-American and pro-Russian stance matches a preference for anti-pluralist politics. Its discourse on global governance matches radical anti-market feelings. Its support for anti-globalisation movements and radical revisions of international institutions matches a support for the politics of protest at home. In all cases the Centre Right's historical values are under attack.

Those are tangible challenges. In comparison with the populist authoritarian Right, the populist Left is organisationally and ideologically vigorous, and it co-opts new political agendas to shed suspicion of extremism. The Centre Right need not, and should not, revert to fighting Cold War battles. It needs to issue regular reminders that the ideological baggage of the populist Left is that of failed modernist projects. It should never lose sight of the meaning of 1989: market democracy is the best way to promote collective well-being, and movements striving for increased democracy and freedom should be supported wherever they arise. What 1989 showed was that the populist Left's ideas, however updated, are at bottom failures. It also showed that freedom and democracy need constant engagement and political nurturing.

The Centre Right should not only refer to its past successes but also address important transnational issues such as the

functioning of the global financial and economic system within a context that recognises human rights, freedom and responsibility. Whereas some actors on the transnational Left, such as Attac, remain confined to the NGO sphere and can hardly be accused of authoritarianism or illiberalism, the Centre Right must highlight the fact that the endorsement of global causes by populist left-wing parties is aimed at halting economic modernisation and discrediting pluralist politics. The parties are essentially exclusionary and potentially authoritarian.

Clearly there is a lot to be said against stationing US missiles in Central Europe and against the global economic and financial system. Mainstream parties need to confront those challenges. With globalisation, Europe's problems become the world's problems and vice versa. The populist mindset has already significantly influenced the public debate in Europe on immigration, culture, values, the welfare state, taxation and so on. As Europe increasingly confronts issues of poverty, development and the environment worldwide, its populists threaten to have a more significant impact on its domestic politics. Put briefly, foreign policy is bound to be instrumentalised more and more in the hands of political entrepreneurs dedicated to keeping Europe connected to its authoritarian past. The Centre Right, the party family that was most effective in extricating Europe from violence and fanaticism, cannot and should not shy away from confronting the challenge posed by populists of all stripes.

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