



Verena Stern

The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis
in Europe

An Overview

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About this publication

The COVID-19 crisis led to increased confidence in governments in many European countries. Restrictions of personal liberties, contact bans and curfews, the lockdown of large sectors of the economy, and the expansion of executive powers in many places imposed to combat the pandemic were widely welcomed and accepted, especially at the beginning of the crisis. However, as the restrictions stretched over weeks, an increasing trend appeared towards a fresh increase of discontent and mistrust towards the governments; in some countries – such as Germany – protests ensued. Moreover, fake news and conspiracy ideologies were not without influence in the public debate. Analyses from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Greece, Spain and Germany, all countries with strong or growing right-wing populist movements and parties, explore the question of whether right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the corona crisis. This summary categorises the trends and developments from a comparative perspective.

About the author

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The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-Wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe An Overview

Country analyses from Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Sweden and Spain

Throughout history, crises – regardless of their nature – have often been the driving force of social destabilisation processes that took advantage of people’s insecurity. In 2020, a series of country analyses commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung examined how the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting right-wing populist and far-right parties in selected European countries. Looking at right-wing forces¹ was an obvious choice, as they tried and are still trying to use the pandemic for their own purposes in some countries. Taking a view at selected countries as well as providing this summary aim to deliver a broader analysis of the situation. This is a snapshot, as the pandemic is still ongoing at the time of publication.

The pandemic, triggered by the novel coronavirus, seemed to arrive suddenly in Europe – despite a delay from the outbreak in Wuhan, China – and unexpectedly hit all European countries and the European Union (EU) as a whole. The global virus and how it should be dealt with had to be gauged and mechanisms to combat it had to be found. Initially, this was done at the national level in the short term because, as became clear in subsequent negotiations on the numerous EU corona aid and reconstruction programmes, a consensual approach by the EU Member States proved to be a difficult process.

In looking at crisis management in the selected countries, two things stand out in particular: First, that in many countries there has been a remarkable increase in the population’s confidence in their respective governments. Second – at least in the short term during the first wave of the pandemic – all parties often pulled together to a large extent and even opposition forces supported the governments instead of criticising them. Conversely, many governing parties invited the political opposition to actively participate in talks. The fact that measures were initially often decided by consensus with representatives of the

opposition, including far-right and right-wing populist parties, shows on the one hand the seriousness of the situation and on the other hand the intention of right-wing parties to seek democratic legitimacy and to present themselves as “state-supporting”. But it also shows something else: At that point in time, the corona crisis offered the Far Right no clear thematic overlap with promising issues for them. Developing measures in the areas of health and economy did not correspond to their strengths. Immigration did not seem to offer a central starting point for mobilising new voters in the face of the challenges of fighting the virus and minimising economic fallout.² Thus, after a consensual first wave, the strategy of many far-right and right-wing populist parties proved to be an oppositional and populist counterattack against the governments’ hesitant measures. They claimed authoritarian intervention should be used to close borders and take harsh measures. However, when this actually happened, there was an abrupt turnaround. Although the measures were accepted and supported by the majority of the population, a mood of dissatisfaction spread among some groups of the population, especially since the first wave, which many right-wing parties seized in their positions and rhetoric. They emphasised their populist approach and performed as defenders of the “civil rights” of the “people” against too harsh measures of an “elite”.

Against this background, the question arises whether right-wing populist and far-right parties in Europe were able to profit from the corona crisis. Through a comparative analysis of countries with strong or growing far-right and right-wing populist parties, the aim is to demonstrate how these parties reacted to a health crisis which, on first examination – in contrast, for example, to the crisis in dealing with the situation of refugees around 2015 – did not involve any of their core issues. Did they nevertheless succeed in capitalising on the crisis and mobilising votes?

This report aims to highlight common findings as well as national specifics. In addition, it aims to initiate a discussion on how these findings can be translated into common European recommendations for action and solidarity-based

¹ We distinguish far-right from right-wing populist parties in terms of their orientation. The main criteria in this regard are the question of overthrowing the system (do they want to change or abolish the existing democratic system) and the question of the legitimacy of violence. The term “far right” refers to all political forces beyond the basic democratic consensus. In the countries analysed, depending on the context, different historical developments, characteristics and parliamentary locations of right-wing parties can be found, which are reflected in the spectrum from right-wing populist to far-right.

² Still, there was legitimate concern that racist framing would be employed, which quickly manifested in occurrences of anti-Asian racism, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, and calls for border closures.



community solutions in dealing with the issue. Whether right-wing parties will be able to profit from the consequences of the corona crisis (social and economic upheavals, economic deterioration for companies and private households, growing inequality in the nation states and in Europe, and a looming rejection of common EU actions, etc.) will become clear in the coming years and will depend to a large extent on the further handling of the pandemic.

A LOOK AT SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

GERMANY

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the right-wing populist and in parts far-right opposition party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) tried to point out the government's mismanagement and called for a stricter lockdown and closed borders. However, after these measures were actually taken and thus, opposing the measures was no longer possible, the party reacted to the growing discontent among the population. Accordingly, it changed its positions, pointing to economic damage and the "deprivation" of civil liberties and "freedom" of the people caused by the lockdowns.

Although the measures were supported by the majority of the population during the first and second wave, a minority formed that began vociferously protesting against actual and perceived restrictions in the spring of 2020. These protests were difficult to pin down due to the multitude of

backgrounds of the actors involved. Thus, anti-vaxxers and esoterics demonstrated next to corona deniers and "Reichsbürger."³ The locations where the protests occurred also varied. In Berlin, a protest circle under the slogan "Not without us!" formed around the capitalism-critical "Haus Bartleby," which have also published the newspaper "Democratic Resistance" from the start of the protests. Other protagonists including the vegan chef Attila Hildmann or the former radio presenter Ken Jebsen mobilised for the movement with crude conspiracy myths, mainly over the respective Telegram and YouTube platforms. Other large protests also took place in Stuttgart, where another movement formed under the slogan "Querdenken (lateral thinking) 711" and the initiative of Martin Ballweg. Here, too, efforts were made to present a peaceful front – at the same time, clearly far-right content was shared. Compared to other countries in Europe, not only the large number of demonstrations and participants is striking, but also the spread of numerous (sometimes antisemitic) conspiracy narratives.

Despite the clear attribution and the frequentation of (extreme) right-wing actors, the AfD did not manage to stand out among these protests – it remained at an approval rate

³ "The so-called "Reichsbürger" movement spans a disparate collection of ideas, held together ideologically by a refusal to recognise the legal order and democratic institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany. Members typically insist that the pre-1945 German Reich still exists or call for its reinstatement. Significant parts of the movement are right-wing extremist and heavily influenced by conspiracy ideologies and antisemitism."

of around 9 to 10 percent. Within the already fractured AfD, however, there were discussions about whether to get more involved in the protests, which were gaining popularity, with regard to finding voters, which many in the party called for. A smaller segment argued for more restraint so as not to lose democratic legitimacy and to not be further associated with right-wing extremist forces, especially against the background of the current and further potential observation by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz). So while the party stagnated in 2020 and was more internally fractured than ever, the protests gained traction and successfully mobilised using right-wing rhetoric, fake news, and conspiracy narratives.

FINLAND

In contrast to Germany, no such protests or (online) conspiracies formed in Finland. Although the spread of fake news and conspiracy myths are actually a major catalyst of right-wing movements and parties, the right-wing populist Finns Party took a different approach. Instead of joining individual far-right actors' online mobilisation efforts, the party attempted to head in a democratic-legitimised direction. Their content, rhetoric and the platforms used by the actors can be assigned less to the Far Right and more to the "Centre Right". Thus, traditional channels are used, such as party media, social media and national mainstream media. Criticism of the governing parties and the severe encroachments on the population's fundamental rights was also rather restrained. Compared to other right-wing parties, the Finns Party explicitly advocated the wearing of mouth-nose coverings.

However, the Finns Party expressed clear criticism in the economic sphere, where it called for "economic discipline". In doing so, it adopted positions from the bourgeois opposition parties. Thus, the Finns Party was able to forge ahead with its normalisation. The high national expenditure due to the pandemic was a matter of concern for the Finns Party. For this reason, they also advocated for comprehensive company closures for a short period of time in order to be able to resume operations more quickly afterwards. Moreover, as a Eurosceptic party, they were able to establish a credible issue on the corona crisis in their criticism of EU aid and reconstruction programmes among the population. The right-wing populist party argues that Finnish taxpayers are (supposedly) being overcharged because they pay for the "laziness of southern European countries" through their performance and work. Accordingly, the only demonstration worth mentioning in 2020 was also about Finland's exit from the EU and a "No" to EU aid.

Before the pandemic, the Finns Party's poll numbers exceeded 24 percent – its highest approval rating. During the pandemic, however, this figure fell sharply to below 20 percent because here, as in many other countries, the governing parties gained more support, especially in the first phase. It can therefore be postulated that the Finns Party was not able to profit from the corona crisis. The extra-parliamentary, fragmented Far Right in Finland also failed to capitalise on the pandemic.

FRANCE

Like other far-right and right-wing populist parties, the Rassemblement National (RN) ultimately expected the most benefit from critiquing the government's handling of the pandemic in addition to demanding closed borders and tougher measures. As early as the end of March, the party accused the government of a "state lie" by not reacting adequately to the corona crisis and of taking increasingly authoritarian measures to disenfranchise the population instead of doing something about it. However, this accusation was not shared by other parties. At the same time, the RN distanced itself from right-wing extremist groups that want to see totalitarian structures reflected in the measures. However, in a right-wing populist manner, the RN suggested that they were standing up for the "liberation" of citizens, which the "elites" were denying them. In addition, RN voters more often shared the thesis of a human-made virus and other conspiracy myths, which is why the RN also operated with this.

Another important component of the RN is national chauvinism and an insistence on national sovereignty. Similar to Finland, the party therefore criticised the EU aid and reconstruction programmes, speaking of an "anti-national vision". They claimed the corona crisis would make the "decline of France" apparent. The RN's demands for national borders thus also complemented their critique of globalisation and the EU in the pandemic. In addition, this was a good way to make a connection to one of the RN's central topics: Security. The RN managed to transfer this issue, which was so important for the party, to the pandemic period and use it for its own benefit, depending on the situation. They criticised the government's proposal to release some prisoners early because the virus is more easily transmitted within the confined spaces of prisons. On the other hand, the RN repeatedly made statements to the effect that migrants did not comply with curfews – were therefore criminals – which increased the risk of infection through them. Security will also play an important role for the RN in the upcoming elections in 2021 and 2022, as the issue is steadily gaining importance for the population according to surveys.

During the pandemic, the party was not able to distinguish itself too strongly through its strategy as "anti-establishment" nor its substantive alignment. Marine Le Pen is currently tied with Emmanuel Macron in polls for the next presidential election, but she would be clearly defeated in the second round. However, in view of the economic and social aftermath of the corona crisis, long-term effects may still occur, and the RN may yet manage to benefit from it in the end.

GREECE

The issues of the Far Right in Greece in recent years have mainly been related to immigration and the name dispute over North Macedonia. The latter was settled in 2018, and debates about refugees and migrants have lost their power

of mobilisation. In this respect, seizing the corona crisis was an obvious choice for right-wing actors. However, the first wave of the pandemic was relatively moderate in Greece and the outbreak numbers were contained through strict measures. However, the pandemic exposed problems in the health system; the opposition was particularly critical of the fact that it was not sufficiently adapted to the challenges.

Immediately with the outbreak of the pandemic, conspiracy narratives were an integral part of public discourse, especially on social media. Medical facts were denied or distorted, and the small right-wing populist party *Elliniki Lysi* (“Greek Solution”) and extra-parliamentary groups openly attacked scientists and their credibility. Many also believe that the death toll is exaggerated. Conspiracy narratives are traditionally high in Greece and rapidly circulate on all sorts of topics. Nevertheless, mobilisation through conspiracies, as happened in Germany, largely failed to materialise. The demonstrations were also comparatively marginal and primarily concerned parents who wanted to send their children to school without masks. A potential vaccination discourse is yet to come, but so far, the only conspiracy attempts in this regard have been from the *Elliniki Lysi*.

Even if no demonstrations for this were organised, there was still resentment due to distancing regulations and restrictions on church visits. The influence of the Greek Orthodox Church (GOC) in Greece remains strong and its voice loud in relation to both right-wing ideologies and the coronavirus. Progressive bishops had expressed support for the strict measures to contain the virus, but the majority of bishops are conservative and see the GOC as a victim of the measures. Many bishops saw this as an attack on the GOC, criticising them publicly. This view was shared by many right-wingers and conservatives in the population. Overall, the GOC has lost some of its influence due to its lack of modernisation, but it still holds symbolic power. The GOC has a long tradition of right-wing ideologies, and some bishops supported Golden Dawn (GD) politicians until it was classified as a criminal organisation in October 2020.

The pandemic does not seem to have boosted far-right extra-parliamentary groups and parties. The trial that led to the conviction of GD party leaders in 2020 meant that the party already lost its seats in the national parliament in 2019. In addition, the ruling conservative *Nea Dimokratia* is increasingly seeking to integrate forces on the right-wing fringe, thus the political scope for other movements and parties on this spectrum is currently rather small. The *Elliniki Lysi* party may offer an alternative port of call in the future, but so far, its leader has too little charisma to mobilise supporters of his positions on a large scale. However, it is often difficult to assess how large the influx actually is, as people on the right-wing fringe are difficult to track in terms of polls and elections. Moreover, the economic consequences of the crisis and discontent among the population in particular could contribute to a strengthening of right-wing parties (in any case, it is unlikely that left-wing forces will be able to benefit in the near future).

ITALY

Italy was the first country in Europe to be affected by the pandemic. The government’s stringent measures to combat the virus (Italy’s first lockdown was the strictest in Europe) received strong popular support. The government, then formed by the populist, in parts Eurosceptic, Five Star Movement and the *Partito Democratico*, achieved high approval ratings under the leadership of Giuseppe Conte. There were no public protests against the government’s course during the first wave, nor have there been any conspiracy myths or questioning of the danger posed by the virus in Italy to any significant extent. The force of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, which brought the health system to the brink of collapse, was too great, the images from the hospitals and the military trucks from Bergamo too shocking. As resolute as the government was in imposing closures, so the reaction of the right-wing populist parties was initially vacillating and erratic, at times demanding immediate opening and at other times total closure. In this context, tensions arose, particularly between the national and regional governments. The regions most affected (Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto) are governed by the *Lega*, and here there were definitely diverging interests between the wavering course of party leader Matteo Salvini and regional government leaders. The far-right and right-wing populist parties *Lega*, *Forza d’Italia* and *Fratelli d’Italia* shifted to a fundamental critique of the government’s supposed lack of ability to act, and in the first phase tried to stir up anti-European resentment that the EU had once again (after the financial crisis in 2008 and the crisis in dealing with migration in 2015) not helped Italy and left it to its own devices. However, the establishment of the EU aid and reconstruction programmes, of which Italy was one of the main beneficiaries with 209 billion euros, withdrew the basis for this argument. Salvini tried to link his racist discourse to the pandemic (the whole of Italy was closed, only the ports were open to “illegal immigration”), but without much success: among Italians, the real hardships and existential fears outweighed those imagined.

The populist parties in Italy did not fundamentally question the danger posed by the virus per se and did not try to distinguish themselves in any protest movement, which, in contrast to Germany, has not existed to any significant extent in Italy to-date. The wearing of masks as well as vaccinations were also not questioned. The Far Right used more classic right-wing approaches such as fear of immigration, fake news and anti-science to attack government. But this populist discourse ultimately conveyed more insecurity among the population, which is why little confidence was placed in the crisis management of the right-wing parties. Right-wing parties had sworn themselves to traditional frames instead of demonstrating “stately” responsibility and crisis-proofing. What was a promising strategy in past crises turned out to be the wrong approach here. Attempts such as Salvini pitting “foreigners” against “Italians” did not work because a different framing already existed among the population, namely that the coronavirus spreads regardless of borders. A populist polarisation between “the people” and “the elite” therefore also failed.

In Italy, support for right-wing parties ultimately remained more or less at the same level as before, although the Fratelli d'Italia benefited slightly more than the Lega, as their approval ratings rose a little. In summary, it can be said that the right-wing populist parties have not benefited from the COVID-19 pandemic so far – but it has not harmed them either.

SWEDEN

Sweden followed its own path in responding to the pandemic from the outset. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that the Swedish constitution does not provide for the possibility of declaring a state of emergency, and thus harsh measures cannot be imposed in the first place. From the government coalition's point of view, it would not have been possible to pass such laws anyway due to the lack of majorities in parliament. On the other hand, Sweden is characterised by a very high level of trust in institutions and government, and a strong "culture of voluntarism". Against this background, it is understandable that Sweden issued few restrictions and instead relied on a strategy of reasonableness and voluntarism with regard to travel restrictions, distancing regulations and hygiene measures. The argument was that this would not hurt the economy to the extent that a massive lockdown would. But the high social costs of a lockdown, for example the consequences for young people on the cusp of leaving school, were also included as decisive factors from the outset. The strategy's aim, as in other countries, was to prevent the health system from collapsing. Schools remained open up to Grade 8 as the authorities wanted to prevent severe disadvantages and harm to socially disadvantaged children. Nevertheless, the approach of voluntariness and cost consideration could not meet expectations: For by the end of the year, there were already more than 6,000 fatalities, many of which occurred from the over-70 age group and in old people's homes. Despite the many deaths, confidence in the Ministry of Health was very high at about 60 percent. Although there were more deaths, especially in comparison with the other Nordic countries, the economic loss was no less than in those countries. However, the death toll was still lower compared to France, Italy or Spain, where a hard lockdown was implemented.

As in most other countries, there was a "truce" between the parliamentary parties at the beginning of the pandemic. Until June, all parties met weekly to discuss health, economic and legal measures. This was a novelty in that the right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats, had previously been isolated because of its right-wing orientation – including the party meant giving it room in the parliamentary arena. However, with the vehement rise in deaths, the Sweden Democrat party leader was critical of the government's actions and called for the resignation of chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell. He also accused the government of shirking responsibility in the face of high numbers. Furthermore, he insinuated – resorting to the right-wing hot topic of migration – that most deaths in old people's homes occurred because insufficient attention was paid to Swedish

language skills when selecting nurses (many of whom were immigrants).

Unlike in other countries, the Sweden Democrats were open to vaccination. However, after vaccination damage occurred during the vaccination against the "swine flu" the party campaigned for possible compensation. The Sweden Democrats were also more moderate on conspiracies and did not reinforce them, even though about 30 percent of the population believed that the virus was human-made. However, in terms of economic support for Swedish companies and their workers, EU scepticism and rejection of solidarity-based EU aid and reconstruction programmes, the Sweden Democrats toed the line of other right-wing parties in Europe.

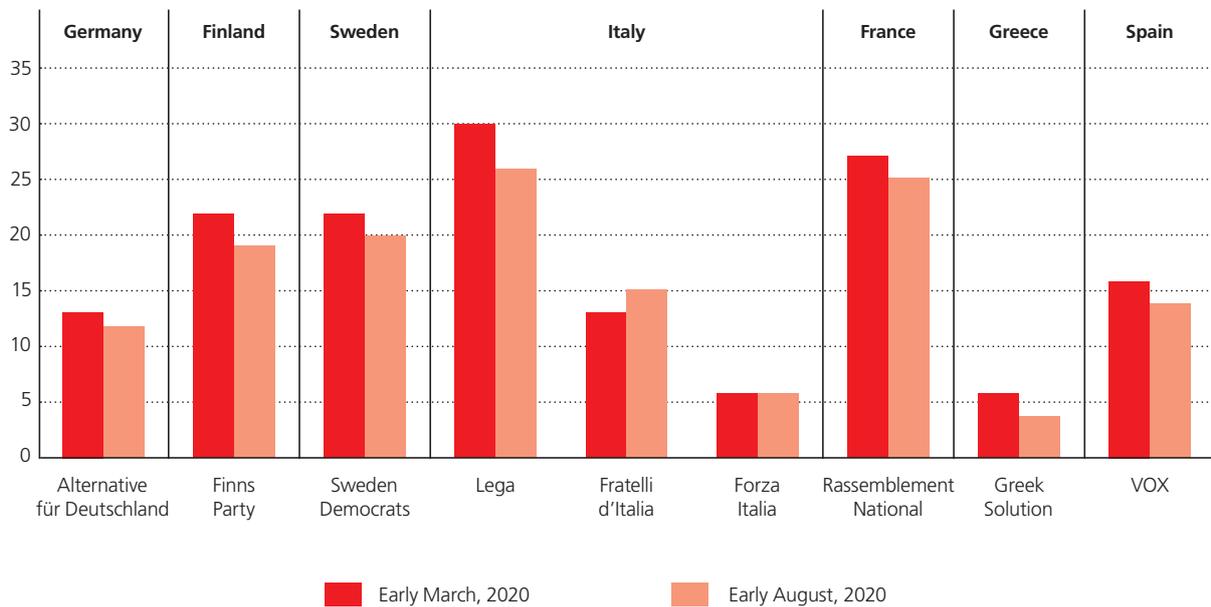
The Sweden Democrats were not able to benefit directly from the corona crisis. At the start of the pandemic, their poll numbers fell while support for the government rose. However, they achieved at least partial normalisation in the parliamentary arena, as they were involved in the weekly consultative meetings and thus came into contact with the conservative parties. In the longer term, this may be a more significant gain from the crisis than a short-term mobilisation of voters.

SPAIN

With the entry of the right-wing populist party VOX into parliament, a shift in discourse to the right and from previously more fundamentalist-nationalist positions to more populist approaches within the party can be observed in Spain. The new discourse is directed in particular against globalisation and supra-national organisations such as the EU. One discourse pattern of VOX, which seeks to represent the "little man," is the rhetorical polarisation between a "living Spain" ("la España viva"), which they advocate, and a "dead Spain" ("España muerta"), which includes, for example, the media, the "elite," or advocates of gender justice. In doing so, VOX imagines the "good people" facing a "corrupt elite". This narrative, which also includes the "unveiling" of alleged secrets or conspiracies, is part of VOX's current strategy.

VOX, which is still a young party, is one of the few right-wing parties in Europe that does not distinguish itself primarily through the issue of migration, but through its focus on "national unity" – in doing so taking advantage of polarisations in the wake of the separatist efforts of some movements such as the Catalan independence movement. The corona crisis seemed to offer another opportunity to take a clearer thematic stance. On the one hand, VOX, like right-wing parties in other countries, initially reacted consensually and supported the first national state of emergency ("estado de alarma"), such as curfews, to contain the pandemic. Thereafter, VOX changed strategy and rejected all further measures by the progressive government – a stance that culminated in a motion of no-confidence against the government in October 2020 (which failed monumentally). At the same time, growing popular discontent provided an oppor-

Figure 2
The Profiteers of Fear? Poll results of right-wing populist parties at the start of and during the pandemic, 2020



Source: own graphic; data from Politico 2021: Poll of Polls. Polling from across Europe, www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/ (last visit: 11.02.2021)

tunity to mobilise people for high-profile demonstrations against the government. In contrast to Germany, however, these demonstrations, organised by VOX, were smaller and focused on the “government’s general mismanagement” rather than on personal “freedoms”. In this way, VOX succeeded in consolidating the distrust in and rejection of the government amongst a part of the population.

Compared to other right-wing parties, VOX was able to establish itself through an effective social-media strategy and thus reach the younger population in Spain. Of all the Spanish parties, VOX has the most followers on social networks such as Instagram.

Still, VOX failed to capitalise on the corona crisis and substantially increase its poll numbers. In the first wave of the pandemic, however, it exerted influence on the conservative Partido Popular’s (PP) discourse and thus helped to ensure that the PP did not continue to support the progressive government’s pandemic measures. However, this hold on the conservative party was reversed when the PP not only opposed VOX’s motion of no confidence in October, but also opposed VOX itself. PP’s clear demarcation from VOX meant that VOX was once again increasingly perceived as a right-wing populist (rather than conservative) party, and the accompanying parliamentary isolation deprived it of legitimacy among right-wing voters. It remains to be seen whether VOX will change its strategy as a result, or whether it will stick to its antagonising rhetoric.

PROFITEERS OF FEAR?

Although the countries mentioned above have different backgrounds in terms of the emergence and manifestation of COVID-19 – Italy and Spain, for example, were much harder hit by the pandemic – as well as the presence of different dominant right-wing populist to far-right parties, overlaps across borders nevertheless exist. This section analyses, on the basis of the individual country reports, which similarities and differences can be identified and whether the right-wing parties as a whole succeeded in exploiting the pandemic for their own benefit.

In the beginning, the corona crisis appeared to be an extremely unfavourable undertaking for (extreme) right-wing causes. The topic of health, notwithstanding social Darwinist motives, is not necessarily on their agenda. Among the population, the virus was soon recognised as a serious threat and, consequently, strict measures to contain the pandemic were accepted – making it even more difficult to find a particular right-wing position. On the one hand, this was reflected in the largely constructive cooperation between the far-right and right-wing populist parties and the government. On the other hand, meandering suggestions on how to deal with the situation reflected this searching attitude.

However, the initial uncertainty about what the right could get out of the issue quickly changed. Attacking government

strategies proved to be a viable way of regaining a distinctive profile in almost all countries. Nevertheless, as things stand at present, far-right and right-wing populist parties have not been able to categorically profit from the corona crisis. If anything, their poll numbers fell, and they failed to recruit new members. In Germany, the protests enabled mobilisation for right-wing causes and a right-wing movement, but instead of aspiring for government participation, they are instead longing for the government to be overthrown, which will not find too wide-ranging support in the mainstream. In Spain, VOX contributed to a rightwards shift of rhetoric, but maneuvered itself out of parliament. The Finns Party and to some extent the Sweden Democrats, on the other hand, succeeded in being perceived as a serious parliamentary force. However, some of these efforts to normalise and establish the situation were already evident before the pandemic. In Greece, the ruling conservative party also covers the right-wing spectrum, which means that there should be no room for a far-right or right-wing populist party in the near future. Finally, in Italy, the right-wing opposition seems to have resigned itself to being unable to profit off the pandemic and is instead already preparing for the next elections.

CONSPIRACIES

Criticism of the measures taken raises the question of strategies of the Far Right in dealing with the pandemic. To this end, it must first be clarified whether corona is taken seriously by the far-right and right-wing populist parties in the available selection of countries, since its denial has repeatedly circulated in right-wing circles. In our analysis of the parties, however, the virus was not questioned across the board. In Sweden, Finland and Greece, the right-wingers hardly played down the virus nor did they spread conspiracies. However, in Germany, for example, an AfD member of the Bundestag said that COVID-19 runs the same course as influenza and that the measures taken were therefore unnecessary. He also speculated that this exaggeration was deliberate on the part of the federal government in order to pursue corresponding, ideologically motivated policies. Similar conspiracy narratives about alleged evil machinations of “elites” or antisemitic enemy stereotypes together with esoteric approaches and the rejection of vaccinations and science make up the right-wing discourse on the pandemic in Germany. In protests throughout the country and online, these narratives are invoked to protest for “personal liberties” and against “coercive measures” by the government.

The French far-right RN, in turn, suggested that the French government was using authoritarian measures and disenfranchisement of citizens to cover up its own mistakes and failures in the health system. The party also seized on “alternative” explanations for the origins of the pandemic among its voters and expressed doubts that the virus is of animal origin. Italy’s Salvini and Meloni called the conspiracy by its name right away, claiming back in March that the virus was manufactured in a lab in Wuhan. In Spain, VOX also spoke of a virus created in China.

MIGRATION

Such racist (and later partly also antisemitic) statements are part of a strategy of far-right and right-wing populist parties in dealing with the pandemic. After migration as a core right-wing issue was not initially obvious, four framings soon crystallised as to how the issue of migration was used in the context of the corona crisis. First, there was concern that the virus would enter the country through (labour or refugee) migration. Closing borders is a core demand of the Far Right anyway; now it has been repurposed for the corona crisis and appropriated as protection against the virus. The fact that many governments were quick to take this measure as protection against the virus was well received by right-wing parties.

Second, migrant neighbourhoods, as in France, or workers, as in Sweden, were placed under general suspicion of spreading the virus. In France, Le Pen suggested that curfews would not be respected in neighbourhoods with higher levels of migration. The Sweden Democrats, on the other hand, attributed rising case numbers in old people’s homes to an increased danger from “poorly integrated” migrant care staff whose language skills were insufficient. In Italy, too, the Far Right constructed a dichotomy of “Italians in need of protection” who were housebound because of the pandemic, and newly arriving refugees who might be infected and thus bring the virus into the country. In a similar vein, in Madrid, VOX made a plea for a slowdown in immigration, believing that migrants were importing the virus.

Third, a rise in anti-Asian racism has been recorded in several countries. In Germany, for example, there was a marked increase in attacks on people read as Asian both online and offline from February 2020 onwards under the insinuation that they were bringing the virus from China to Germany.

Fourth, there were active attempts to link the virus’ spread with flight and asylum, as illustrated by, among other things, a trip to Greece by the RN. This framing failed due to lack of cases and dissemination. The Greek discourse would probably have been different with dramatic case numbers in refugee camps.

EU AND GLOBALISATION

Another unifying theme of right-wing parties across national borders in times of the corona crisis is the return to the nation. This meant that anti-globalisation and EU scepticism were increasingly addressed, and right-wing parties were able to further expand these positions. Le Pen, for example, placed the responsibility for the pandemic in “ultra-liberal globalisation”, the aim of which was the abolition of borders and nation states. The RN also reads the EU aid and reconstruction programmes as an “anti-national vision” to undermine the nation-state’s own competences. VOX argues similarly, lamenting a looming dissolution of the Spanish nation-state into a federal EU. Like the Sweden Democrats in its neighbouring country, the Finns Party also sees Finland’s solidarity contribution to EU aid and reconstruction pro-

grammes as an abandonment of its own sovereignty and emphasised the burden on domestic taxpayers who have to work hard to pay for it. In doing so, however, it joins Finland's bourgeois-conservative mainstream instead of setting itself apart from it. The AfD also stressed its concern about German taxpayers being financially exploited for the benefit of other European countries. Italy's right-wing parties also warned against joint financing, recalling Italy's strict austerity policy imposed by the EU. Sweden, on the other hand, fought alongside the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria against larger EU aid and reconstruction programmes and advocated for loans instead of subsidies.

DEMONSTRATIONS

After conspicuously large demonstrations formed in Germany, the question arises as to whether protests occurred in other countries as well. In Spain, VOX organised demonstrations in May and October, which were held as car convoys due to the contact restrictions imposed by COVID-19, to protest the government's crisis management during the pandemic. While there were some smaller demonstrations in Italy, Salvini and Meloni did not take part in them nor did they publicly support them. The protesters mainly came from the milieu of relevant actors, such as vaccination opponents or QAnon supporters.

In Sweden or Greece, on the other hand, hardly any demonstrations worth mentioning were held. In Sweden, there were very small demonstrations in front of the parliament, but no parties were involved. In Greece, there were isolated protests against the wearing of mouth-nose coverings, but almost exclusively in the context of school openings and dealing with school children. However, right-wing parties did not seem to play a role in these protests. In Finland, only one significant demonstration was registered, mobilising against European aid and reconstruction programmes and in favour of leaving the EU. As a result, the Finns Party's youth organisation subsequently opened a referendum on Finland's contribution to the EU aid package.

WHAT NOW?

After a year of the COVID-19 pandemic (and still with no concrete end in sight), as a snapshot, it can be said that the right-wing parties studied have not been able to directly profit from this crisis. However, it is important to await further developments, as the social and economic after-effects in particular could still change this. In Germany, France, Greece, Italy and Spain, the potential for belated far-right or right-wing populist success seems at least to exist, and in Finland and Sweden a partial normalisation of right-wing parties in everyday politics can already be observed. The chances of participating in a future bourgeois-conservative government as supporters or even as coalition partners and thus gaining political influence have improved for the Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party. And in Germany, the AfD could succeed in the long term in attaching itself to the successes of the broad protest mobilisations after all. At

present, actual (and perceived) economic losers are being heard fairly little – if this continues, there is a danger that the right will become the (only) rallying point for their doubts and insecurities.

However, the fact that these developments are still ongoing in parts gives democratic forces the opportunity to counteract this. The following section is therefore devoted to the findings of the country analyses and, with a view to the EU, derives recommendations for action in dealing with far-right players.

A central point in dealing with far-right and right-wing populist parties is the nature of the socio-political discourse conducted. Beyond the pandemic, this applies to dealing with right-wing forces in general. The tone in which other parties approach these debates often has far-reaching implications. In Spain, for example, progressive forces reacted with polarisation and accusations even before the corona crisis, which ultimately tended to legitimise VOX among the population and helped it gain support. What would the situation in Spain look like if the progressive camp had not dealt directly with right-wing parties, dealing instead with its own issues and approaches? Isolating right-wing parties could prevent them from being considered part of the discourse. Accordingly, any polarisation would also shift.

On the whole, the crisis seems to show that the general suggestions that experts from civil society and academia have been formulating for years on how to deal with far-right and right-wing populist forces apply equally well to the time of the pandemic. Strengthening solidarity and social cohesion, dealing with one's own issues clearly, transparently and credibly and looking less at others. An open, but above all clearly democratic social discourse minimises the issues which anti-democratic movements can target as their own. Three important points must be noted here⁴:

1. Isolate right-wing parties discursively and in parliament

Certainly, right-wing forces do not just disappear on their own if ignored for long enough. Nevertheless, these parties and discourses need not also be given a forum. At the parliamentary level, then, it makes sense to isolate far-right and right-wing populist parties as far as possible, not to seek dialogue and not to treat them like other – democratic – forces in order to prevent normalisation. Precisely because right-wing forces in this arena strive to legitimise themselves as democratic and parliamentary, a clear demarcation is especially necessary.

A further purposeful exclusion of far-right groups could be to ban them more quickly (e.g. in the case of criminal offences such as under the Prohibition Act) and more rigorously.

⁴ In the FES project "Reclaiming Action" (cf. Krell 2019 et al.), experts used the example of Northern Europe to formulate some of the following recommendations for action, which can also be found elsewhere in the same or similar form.

This also applies to far-right content and appearances in social media (see also point 3). Democratically dealing with and debating those issues that otherwise offer potential for right-wing agenda-setting, such as social inequality, perceived experiences of deprivation as well as migration, is also advisable (see point 2).

Both democratic parties and civil society must therefore maintain their distance from right-wing politicians and groups, disclose their strategies and pursue their own democratic treatment of current issues in order to give (extreme) right-wing actors as little space as possible in the debate. With regard to the pandemic, it could be deduced that right-wing protests and conspiracies should not be given too much space and visibility, as this legitimises and spreads such positions in the first place.

2. Taking visibility away from right-wing parties through progressive policies

Social inequality, economic insecurity and perceived fears of decline can be powerful drivers of right-wing movements. An active progressive social policy with the goals of democratisation, inclusion, and greater equality could at least remove the *raison d'être* from a part of the right-wing electorate. Economic security and social equality strengthen confidence in democracy and make authoritarian solutions increasingly unattractive. This policy must be communicated in an understandable and transparent manner. In doing so, one must not be afraid of confrontations with dehumanising positions or a clear demarcation to the right.

This is also particularly true for pandemic containment measures. For example, concerns about COVID-19 vaccination should be conscientiously addressed and overcome through education and transparent plans. Communication from above as well as pointing a moral finger prevent positive effects and “getting people on board”. Comprehensible and reliable communication is essential here. Economic losses and justified criticism also need to be addressed and dealt with so that people are not left with right-wing rallies as their only option to feel heard.

3. Taking social media seriously as a political space

Finally, the growing mobilisation via platforms on social media will be discussed. Right-wing actors spread (partly anti-semitic) conspiracy narratives and right-wing propaganda, fake news and calls for demonstrations there. It is essential to think in a contemporary manner and to recognise and monitor the most important channels. The Internet is not a lawless space and social debates must follow democratic rules just as they should offline. Fake news must not be spread unchallenged, and violations of personal rights, human rights or laws online must also be punished in order to set a framework. It is necessary to create legal certainty and the ability to act and this must also be implemented jointly in the European context. Civil society and academic actors have valuable expertise in this area, which should be used for an exchange between political decision-makers and security authorities in order to find viable solutions together.

The spread of Fake News and conspiracy narratives in the COVID-19 pandemic has an effect that should not be underestimated when a significant portion of right-wing voters, for example in Sweden or France, believe in a human-made virus and many Germans take to the streets against supposed “forced vaccinations”, declaring Bill Gates or the 5G mobile network to be the cause of the pandemic. A radicalisation effect can also be observed offline, for example, in attacks on people read as Asian especially at the beginning of the pandemic or in attacks on mobile phone masts or institutions all over Europe.

In summary, it is important to educate and take a clear stance – online and offline – during and also after the pandemic. In the long run, this can only be achieved through solidarity, and through European and global solutions instead of insisting on national sovereignties. A COVID-19 pandemic that is ultimately overcome together could also trigger solidarity-based cooperation on other urgent issues, such as climate change or redistribution.

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EUROPA

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, Greece and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:
fes.de/c19rex