

IDENTITY DISCOURSES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The case of the extreme right

I – Introduction and central research question

“Turkey for the Turks. Europe for the Europeans”. These simple catchphrases captured the position of an Italian party towards the prospect of Turkish accession to the EU (quoted in Mudde 2007: 170). What is interesting about this formula is that it came from the Freedomites (*Die Freiheitlichen*), an Italian extreme right party based in South Tyrol and whose main purpose is purely nationalistic: to act as a branch of the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in calling for the transfer of the South Tyrol province from Italian to Austrian jurisdiction. As the process of construction of the EU progresses and its borders are expanded, so are its constituent members – states, peoples, parties – forced to rethink their place in the wider European Union. An important aspect of this rethinking concerns the extent to which conceptions of state, nation and identity can accommodate a new source of authority and, potentially, allegiance.

The purpose of this project is to study the impact of the interplay between national and supranational identities on extreme right party discourses, focusing particularly on developments in the European Union. Although there is wide variation in the type of definitions and names used to describe the extreme right, nationalism is, in some way or other, always at the core of the party family. This is usually taken to inform their attitude

towards the European Union, in the shape of Euroscepticism, on the basis that the nationalism displayed is of an exclusive, closed kind, which therefore does not allow for any type of authority beyond that displayed in the state – nation relation (Marks, Wilson and Ray 2002). Empirically, however, this often clashes with the attitudes of the parties towards the European Union: first, although it is true that extreme right parties do generally fall under the label ‘Eurosceptic’, there are wide differences across time and space as to the level and objects of opposition to the European Union; additionally, opposition to the European Union, where it exists, does not necessarily translate into a rejection of a European union on grounds of the non-existence of a European identity. The puzzle at the root of this enquiry is therefore that of *how, and to what extent, do extreme right parties reconcile two normally irreconcilable approaches to identity, one emphasising a closed national identity, and one tentatively accepting the existence of some type of European identity?*

The aim of this study is therefore first to map out the extent to which the development of the European Union leads to changes in extreme right parties’ conceptions of national v. supranational identities. In and of itself, the process of construction of a European identity by extreme right parties is a useful object of study, precisely because extreme right parties usually fall under the category of “least likely case” when it comes to appraisal of supranational developments. Additionally, such a construction of a European identity would provide an interesting contrast with arguments such as those of Suleiman (1995), who argues that increasing the use of democratic procedures in the European Union could run the risk of jeopardizing the European project by giving more opportunities for opponents of the European project to make themselves

heard. Such a conclusion would appear less logical if the debate about the legitimacy of the European Union is framed in terms of identity rather than of authority.

II - Literature review

The place and nature of identity in European construction

The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 proved a breaking point in European history, not only because of the transformation of the European Community into the European Union, but also because of the end of the period of relative popular disengagement from the process of constructing the EU. Hooghe and Marks (2009:5) thus claim that there was a shift from “permissive consensus” to “constraining dissensus” in public opinion’s attitudes towards what was primarily the role of elites in constructing the EU. Increasingly, this gap between what public opinion thinks and elites (national and European) do is presented in terms of a “democratic deficit”. In turn, this raises the question of whether the European Union, in order to be fully legitimate as a quasi-state entity, should rest on a *demos* distinct from the different communities that constitute the various member-states of the EU.

The academic debate around this question has mostly been framed in terms of whether individuals can hold several competing or overlapping identities, this also depending on the different intensities of individual attachment towards one’s nation (Carey 2002). The extent to which conceptions of identity determine public support for the European Union is subject to debate, and is something which will also need to be addressed in the context of political parties’ attitudes towards the European Union, discussed below. In a review of existing theories of public opinion attitudes towards the

European Union, Gabel (1998) identified two main groups of potential determinants: utilitarian attitudes (focused, for instance, on economic gain), and identity-based attitudes. On the basis of statistical analyses, he concluded that identity-based attitudes do not have much impact on the likelihood of support.

This is, however, increasingly contradicted by strands in the literature which argue, on the contrary, that identity matters when seeking to explain support for, or opposition to, the European Union. Shifts of allegiance were an internal component of Haas' neofunctionalist theory, according to which the building of a European Union as an economic and political project would inevitably, by a process of spillover, result in greater identification with the European project among both elites and individual citizens (Haas 1958). While there has been nothing inevitable about the development of the European Union, more and more arguments are put forward according to which individual identities are critical in shaping support for European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2008; Herrmann, Risse and Brewer 2004).

Furthermore, it is increasingly recognised in the literature that identities are not mutually exclusive, but rather can overlap, so that one individual can accommodate several layers of identity (be they local, religious, national, European or otherwise) and shift the primacy from one to the other depending on the extent (Jung 2008). This does not, however, hold to the same degree for all individuals. Thus, Hooghe and Marks (2005; 2008) and Börzel and Risse (2009) argue that whether identities are exclusive or inclusive of other territorial identities has an impact on public opinion towards the EU.

Yet the debate on the possible existence of a European *demos* can also be framed in terms of the nature of this identification. Tajfel (1981:254-5) defines identity as “that

part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership). Moving from individual identity to group identification, he sees the latter as comprising of two necessary components: cognitive (awareness of membership), evaluative (this awareness is related to some value connotations). To these two components can be added a third in the shape of "an emotional investment in the awareness and evaluations" (Tajfel 1982:2). The necessity of such emotional investment is, however, questioned in the case of the European Union: as Schmitter argued, a rationally-based "nonnational citizenship" of a non-traditional nation-state could be used to replace a shared identity founded on a common emotional investment (Schmitter 2000, cited in Axtmann 2006:96).

The relationship between the European Union and individual citizens is, however, most often mediated, by media, interest groups, or politicians. We now turn to the latter, more specifically to political parties, to examine the role of identity in their approach to the European Union.

Political parties: European Union and identity

By contrast with the literature on individual approaches to identity in the European Union, that on party-based attitudes only rarely raise this question of identity: rather, as Hooghe and Marks (2008:12) put it: "identity has greater weight in public opinion than for elites or interest groups". Unfortunately, this is also reflected in the literature on party positions on European integration which, to a large extent, tends to classify party discourses, as a whole, along a spectrum ranging from Europhilia to

Euroscepticism, without paying much attention to the specific components of these discourses.

Two assumptions found in the literature, however, point to a need to study more in depth how parties consider and use concepts of identity within the European Union. First, party positions on European integration are routinely presented as an inverted U-shaped curve, with parties at the extremes of the political spectrum presenting the highest levels of opposition to the EU (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002). Research on extreme right parties and the European Union point, however, increasingly to the need to introduce more distinctions in these assessments. Case studies of extreme right parties show that Euroscepticism has not, historically, always been the position of extreme right parties towards the European Union (Williams 2008). Similarly, it is only in 1998 that the Italian *Lega Nord* switched from being a strong supporter of European integration to opposition to the European Union, as expressed by its recent proposal to hold a referendum against the Lisbon Treaty in May 2008 (Chari, Iltanen and Kritzinger 2004). Furthermore, the case of the Romanian *Partidul România Mare*, which officially supports membership of the European Union, highlights the need to go beyond a monolithic understanding of the extreme right as preconditioned to oppose the European Union (Greco 2006). Such differences across parties and over time thus raise two important questions: first, on what elements of their attitude towards the European Union is difference across parties most visible? Second, is there a straightforward relationship between support for the European Union / support for the idea of a European identity, and opposition to the European Union / opposition to the idea of a European identity? Or is

the relationship more complex, allowing extreme right parties' appraisal of a European identity combined with a lesser degree of support for the European Union?

Second, on the basis that "parties have long-standing agendas that condition the way they respond to new challenges" such as that presented by European integration, parties of the extreme right are classified *a priori* as stable in their strong opposition to European integration because of their narrow and constraining ideology based on the defence of the nation, national culture and sovereignty (Marks, Wilson and Ray 2002: 585). Similarly, for Netjes and Edwards (2005), extreme right parties frame opposition to supranational governance by seeking to defend the national community. It is therefore assumed that, in the case of extreme right parties, attitudes towards the European Union are automatically defined by the nationalist traits which form the core of these parties' ideology. In turn, Cinpoes (2008) argues that, where national and European identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nationalism does represent an obstacle for the development of a European identity because it is based on an emotional discourse which makes the nation the one and only referent for identification, thereby precluding the possibility of identification with any other entity.

III – Argument

The argument pursued here is that, in terms of their relationship with the EU, extreme right parties cannot only be defined from the perspective of nationalism. Rather, the process of development of the EU can lead to tension between national and

international identities within the extreme right parties, which can lead them to reformulate, or at least qualify, their stance on identity.

With respect to the EU, the tension between the national and supranational levels can operate on two dimensions. First, the European Union presents a challenge to extreme right parties since its development as an entity blurs the boundaries between the national and the supranational level. Such blurring of boundaries is usually most visible in its political and economic dimensions, primarily through the extensive transfer of power from national decision-making centres to a new set of institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg. But EU developments also encompass a cultural dimension. The origins of the EC were influenced by pre-war and contemporary ideas of a community of values, historical, religious and democratic. Coudenhove-Kalergi's Paneuropean movement of the 1930s, for instance, allied cultural considerations with the promotion of a federal Europe. Some also argue that Christianity was an important factor behind Robert Schuman's conversion to the European project (Milward 1992). While this aspect of European construction may have been downgraded in the subsequent development of the EU, it has re-emerged in recent years as the EU both deepens (the European Convention on the Future of Europe was the scene of a debate on the inclusion of religious references in the proposed constitution) and widens. In particular, the renewed process of Turkey's application for membership has been accompanied by a politicisation of the question of the development of a shared European identity (Hurd 2006). References to identity in relation to the European Union thus encompass concepts of culture and way of life, both national and European, and whether the former is challenged or strengthened by integration and enlargement. This informs a first question: does deepening and widening

in European construction lead to an increased politicisation of the role of identity in the discourses of extreme right parties?

Second, and most importantly, the changing boundaries of the European Union as well as its increasing role on the international scene, can serve as test cases to bring to the fore this question of an EU identity. With the process of enlargement, the definition of those “in” and “out” of the European Union has changed. This is, in many ways, reflected in the discourses as well as the organisational practices of extreme right parties, particularly with reference to the types of “allies” the extreme right parties of the older member-states can count on in the European Union. The European Parliament’s 2007 “Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty” grouping, including members of the French *Front National*, the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, the Belgian *Vlaams Belang*, one independent British MEP, the Italian *Azione Sociale con Alessandra Mussolini* and *Fiamma Tricolore*, but also from the Romanian *Partidul România Mare* and the Bulgarian *Ataka*, was an example of the kinds of opportunities opened up by the latest round of enlargement (BBC 2007; Vassilev 2008).¹ Although it can to some extent be explained by the material benefits associated with the formation of a party grouping in the European Parliament, this initiative can also be seen as atypical for those parties of the older member states, such as the *Front National*, whose stance was traditionally suspicious of Central and Eastern European countries joining the European Union (Schori Liang 2007). This raises the question of the extent to which the process of enlargement was accompanied by a change in the perception of Western European extreme right

¹ The fact that it only lasted for 11 months and was brought down by chauvinistic remarks between Italian and Romanian members of the group against the also reflects, of course, its limitations.

parties towards Central and East European candidate countries. Conversely, extreme right parties of Central and Eastern Europe contain many elements of opposition or distrust towards their neighbours, both further to the East (Russia) and to the West, primarily Germany (Schori Liang 2007). In this respect, accession to the European Union can be expected to lead to a readjustment in considerations of neighbouring countries as friends or foes, particularly with respect to the security policy provided by the European Union.

Additionally, by dealing with other actors on the international stage, the European Union engages in a construction of its identity, which in turn can inform the conceptions that critical bystanders, such as extreme right parties, have of European identity. Through its increasing presence on the international scene (e.g. through peace-keeping missions in Africa or the Balkans), the EU develops a role and an identity as an international actor. This interaction sets the scene for observers to develop or redefine their own conception of the EU's role and identity by comparison with other actors on the global scene. The second question relates to whether the increase in interactions of the EU, as an actor in its own right, with other players in the international field, increases the likelihood that extreme right parties' identity discourses will be shaped in terms of European, rather than purely national, terms. Three such actors, of relevance both to the EU and to extreme right parties, can be identified: the USA, Russia (including its image as the successor state to the communist ideology) and Turkey.

The EU and the USA

On the international scene, the European Union can be seen to have increasingly developed, over time, as a counterpoint to the US as a rival political and economic power

on the world stage. But this rivalry also has an impact on processes of identification: the EU as a “normative power” can contrast itself with the more militarised presence of the US in international affairs, e.g. through its use of “shock and awe” democratization, or other instances of use of its technological and military power (Manners 2006). As such, comparison with America, conceptualized as Europe’s negative “other” can allow for a different understanding of the identity and role of the EU itself (Citrin and Sides 2004:184).

The US is also a relevant international player for extreme right parties: anti-Americanism was at the core of the original platform of some of the most prominent extreme right parties at inception, such as the French *Front National* (personal interview with Catherine Salagnac, member of the *Front National*’s European Secretariat, 06.09.2007). The same holds for many, if not most, current extreme right parties, whose opposition to the USA and its alleged influence on international organisations (e.g. WTO, NATO or UN) often takes an important place on their agenda (Mudde 2007). This is not, however, the case for all parties of the extreme right: the Austrian Jörg Haider, leader of the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ), then of the *Bündnis Zukunft Österreichs* (BZÖ), who on the contrary showed much support for the USA, an attitude somewhat paralleled by the Belgian *Vlaams Belang* and the Polish *Ligi Polskich Rodzin* (ibid.).

While contemporary political events are rife with encounters between the EU and the USA, some instances can be particularly illuminating for studying their impact on extreme right conceptions of the European Union. Such an instance could, for instance, be the war in Iraq.

The EU and Russia

Equally interesting are the settings in which the EU and Russia come into contact with each other. This is interesting firstly because Russia also represents a significant “other” of the European Union, both in negative and positive ways (Neumann 1999). First, the development of the European integration project is bound up with the post-war context of the Cold War division between the Eastern and Western spheres. Nowhere was the discursive distinction between the EU and the communist sphere as visible as in the process of enlargement to central and Eastern European countries, which started already before the fall of the Berlin wall. The last round of enlargement was motivated by the need to avoid a power void and the resulting chaos and potential emergence of nationalist or authoritarian movements following from the collapse of the various communist regimes. More importantly, perhaps, the campaign membership led by the Central and Eastern European applicant countries was pervaded by a normative rhetoric which described membership as a “return to Europe”, implicitly opposing the idea (or ideal) represented by the EU, to their experience of the several decades spent under the umbrella of communist rule (Schimmelfennig 2001). Furthermore, more than a decade after the fall of communism, and several years after accession to the European Union, some Central and Eastern European states still present political cultures revolving around the issue of communism. In particular, the normal left/right economic cleavage has no determining influence on the Hungarian political sphere, which displays instead cleavages revolving on the issue of opposition to the communist / socialist past (Körösényi 1999). Here, anti-communism, spread across all parties, plays an especial role

among the right-wing parties for which it functions as a common denominator (Enyedi 2003).

Communism also has an interesting place in the discourses of extreme right parties. Particularly in Western countries, communism was one of the core ideological referents of these parties: in France, communism was the main policy theme of the *Front National* from its creation in 1972 until the late 1980s and the breakdown of the USSR (only from then on, under the influence of Jean-Pierre Stirbois, the party's Secretary General, did immigration come at the forefront of the party's ideology). This was one of the reasons that underpinned the party's support for the European Community, seen as a shield against the expansion of the USSR and of its ideology (personal interview with Carl Lang, member of the *Front National*'s general secretariat, 04.09.2007).

Interestingly, EU – Russia relations have also been framed in a more negative light, which also reflects on understandings of the EU's identity. Thus, many sceptics of the enlargement process prior to the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries referred to this as transferring political subordination from Moscow to Brussels (Mudde 2007). Extreme right parties are among the prime exponents of this likening of the EU to some type of repeat of the Soviet Union, both across Western and Eastern European countries. Among the former, the Italian *Lega Nord* thus spoke of the European Union as of a “Soviet Union of Europe” (Quaglia 2005: 286), while among the latter István Csurka, leader of the Hungarian MIÉP, wrote that “the European Constitution is a new Soviet system of centralization that was prepared in the West” (cited in Mudde 2007: 161).

Among recent instances of interaction between the EU and its Russian neighbour, the Georgian conflict, as well as the current gas crisis between Russia and the Ukraine, can provide the type of instance in which the pitting of these two actors in the same arena can lead external observers to redefine their understanding of the EU's identity.

The EU and Turkey

Finally, Turkey can be taken as the EU's third significant 'other', because of the close involvements of these two countries over Turkey's long-lasting candidate status. Here, perhaps more than with Russia or the USA, the identity aspect of the EU is brought forth, primarily because of the cultural and religious differences between the two (Hurd 2006). Extreme right parties thus tend to agree on their opposition to Turkish accession to the European Union, claiming, in the words of the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, that "Turkey does not belong to Europe" (FPÖ 2009). Similarly, quoting the Commission's statement that "the EU is defined by its values more than by its fixed geographical limits", the *Front National* argued in the 2007 national election manifesto that this implies that Turkey's application for membership should not be accepted (*Front National* 2007:62).

Does this process of othering also affect extreme right parties? As outlined in the literature review, it is an accepted common feature of the extreme right that it is based on closed, exclusive understandings of the nation which can be assumed to lead to rejection of others, such as the European Union, or representatives of other nations. On the basis of the variation in extreme right parties' levels of opposition to the European integration

project, and of the variation in the alternatives that they propose, I suggest that there is indeed space for extreme right parties to develop discourses of European identity, particularly as long as the European Union, as an international actor, engages with other actors on the world scene.

IV – Methodology and data

The existing literature on parties of the extreme right suffers from certain methodological shortcomings: “the subject is usually approached either by analysing the radical right as a general trend, with relatively little attention to the realities of particular cases (...) or by focusing on particular cases, with little or no effort to relate them to one another, or to use them as building blocks for generalisations.” (Schain, Zolberg and Hossay 2002:4). This project rests on the combination of case studies with a comparative approach in order to address the aim of tracing the impact of the EU as an actor on the international scene on extreme right parties’ conceptions of national and European identities. Case studies, “the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalisable to other events” (George and Bennett 2004: 5), are used to trace the evolution of individual parties’ approach to the EU and to develop an empirically-based understanding of the evolution of extreme right parties’ approach to the potential tension between national and European identities.

The case studies will be complemented by the use of discourse analysis in order to map out discourses of identity in the pronouncements of the extreme right parties under study. The material to be used for this purpose will be drawn primarily from the parties’

official literature. This includes primarily interviews of party representatives and party manifestos, for both national and European elections. Original manifestos are, for the most part, easily accessible through databases held by the Euromanifesto project conducted by the University of Mannheim (<http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/manifestos>), and, in the case of national election manifestos, through the widely available digitalised archive of the Comparative Manifestos Project.

VI – Case selection

A few observations can be made about the selection criteria. First, the methodology chosen calls for a small number of cases, in the region of two or three, in order to be able to juxtapose in-depth and comparative approaches. I have earlier referred to the extreme right party family as some sort of “least likely” group when it comes to discussions of appraisal of a European identity. Nonetheless, within this party family, some distinctions can be drawn, which provide indications for the rationale to pursue in selecting the cases. A first dimension is the overall position on European integration, so as to select cases representing a range of positions, from support to opposition (however defined) to the integration project. A second dimension is that of length of membership of the European Union: if one takes Schimmelfennig’s (2001) theory of rhetorical action for granted, whereby the last round of accession to the European Union was framed by the candidate countries in terms of their ‘belonging’ to a European culture and home, it becomes reasonable to assume that discourses relating to identity will differ from the older member-states to the newer ones.

A discussion of the definition of the extreme right party family will, of course, also be necessary in order to ensure a measure of homogeneity across the cases. As Mudde (2007) points out, a plethora of terms and definitions exists for a phenomenon which is at best difficult to pin down due to its heterogeneity across time and space. A primary task will therefore be to select or provide a definition, paying due attention to the fact that what is most usually recognised as a key feature of the extreme right (however defined), namely, nationalism, is also the core concept on which the relationship between parties and the European Union hangs, as conceptualised within this project. This is all the more so as this project aims to consider parties from both the “old” and the “new” European Union, two regions in which the characteristics (programmatic, organisational, social) of extreme right parties differ to such an extent that a common definition is more difficult to achieve. From the outset, however, parties with a regional, rather than national, programmatic appeal, will be left aside since the incentive structure works, in their case, somewhat differently than for parties whose interest lies in defending the interests of a nation whose boundaries are defined as congruent with those of the existing state. Within this more limited definition of the extreme right, the cases for study will be selected preferably among those parties that show a level of historical stability and electoral success: these restrictions are set up primarily to ensure a greater ease in the collection of data, amongst other aspects in terms of regularity of output of written material, and accessibility of leading party members for interviewing purposes. Parties represented in the European Parliament will also be privileged, partly for the reason just mentioned but also because these will be more likely to engage more with current European issues.

While the cases for study have not been selected yet, two cases seem most interesting, namely the French *Front National* and the Romanian *Partidul România Mare*. Both are well-established and relatively successful representatives of the extreme right party family. They present, however, differences which may help to highlight the factors leading to an adaptation of identity discourses. Two major differences are notable. The first is provided by geographical diversity, with the selection of cases across Eastern and Western Europe, with corresponding differences in the length of membership of the European Union. The second is presented by the starting level of support towards the European Union, as the *Front National* tends to be much more Eurosceptic than its Romanian counterpart.

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