

Economic policies of the european far right: Suitable pluralism or cumulated inconsistencies?

- by Jan Rettig -

In this paper, the 'supply' of politico-economic policies and politics on the part of european far right parties shall be examined, namely those of the french Front National (FN), the austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), the british UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the german Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The selection of parties was led by the following criteria: a) they are perceived as far/extreme/populist right, b) as such, they are a link between the fascist and the conservative/mainstream right, c) they have a significant electoral relevance, d) they are ambitious to cooperate on the european level which presupposes a minimum of ideological or programmatic convergence of their e) different specifications of economic ideas. A special delicacy is the fact, that the AfD decided to join two different factions in the european parliament (EP) and their respective europarties: one is home to FPÖ and FN, the other to UKIP. The perspective in splitting up is to overcome the fragmented european right and to create an overarching right bloc at the european level. (Pretzell 2016)¹ So the case selection tries to reflect on a virulent ambition to cooperate more intensely among far right parties. The leading questions will be: How relevant are politico-economic conceptions for these parties? How did the respective positions evolve in the past? Is the politico-economic pluralism which exists within the contemporary far right suitable or are there too many inconsistencies to live with?

Certainly, alliance and coalition building in and around the European Parliament is highly motivated by the parliamentary and monetary advantages of the faction or party status. But, taking the parties seriously, their constant attempts to cooperate suggests, that there is more to this. The often stressed 'Europe of Fatherlands/Nations/Peoples' has become a very important common denominator of nationalist ideology all over Europe. The fundamental critique or rejection of immigration to Europe has developed into one of the core programmatic pillars of the european far right (van Spanje 2010). In contrast to that, politico-economic questions do not seem to play a significant role, at least not officially. „We stand for a Europe of economic cooperation between nation states [...]“ (ENF 2016) is the only reference to this field on part of the faction Europe of Nations and Freedom² (ENF), not even in its common declaration, but via a personal statement of Marcel de Graaff, delegate of the dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and co-president of the ENF. The statement seems to be of small informational content, yet, it formulates in all its shortness a crucial ideological ranking: it's the nation states, and consequently the nationalism, which comes first (Mudde 1999: 9/10). Economic ideas are relying on that basis and therefore are secondary. And something else can be drawn out of this: the form of the economy is subject to its function, which is to serve the nation.

1 compare Kemper 2016

2 Members of the ENF are Vlaams Belang_b, Front National_f, Lega Nord_i, FPÖ_a, PVV_nl, Kongres Nowej Prawicy_pl, Alternative für Deutschland_d and one member each of the Partidul Conservator_ro and the UK Independence Party_gb.

How it is shaped, is subject to different understandings of nationalism³. So it's not surprising that neither the europarty Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe, nor its faction in the european parliament, in which UKIP and just recently AfD are part of, are proclaiming in detail their politico-economic ideas. Their charters are short conceptualisations of their ideological and political basis, which are neoliberalism and nationalism (ADDE 2015 / EFDD 2015).

UKIP and AfD are parties whose external perception clearly directs to the far right but whose backgrounds and founding momentums were rather single-issued, that is economically determined. When UKIP was founded in 1993 it promoted almost exclusively one objective: Great Britains exit from the EU.⁴ Four years later it published a manifesto for the elections of the House of Commons, which already encompassed all societal relevant topics. In 2015, this manifesto almost tripled in size. From the beginning on, UKIP positioned itself economically neoliberal. Although it took, and still takes, side with the so-called „left-behinds“ (Ford/Goodwin 2014: 282), the neoliberal desire hasn't changed a bit. As it did in the 1990s, UKIP still demands significant reductions of public expenditures, deficits and debts, cuts in social care and welfare as well as its privatisation, deregulation especially of labour conditions. The few social-protectionist exceptions that are made (e.g. tax relief for the lowest incomes, implementation of a minimum wage⁵) can be interpreted as concessions both to a growing precarious electorate and the tightened economic conditions itself (UKIP 1997 / UKIP 2015; Ford/Goodwin 2014).

The AfD was launched in 2013 with the prime issue against the Euro. Focussed primarily on overall themes, all economic arguments were exclusively neoliberal: a politics of currency stability, a rigid austerity to confront the european debt crisis, a reduction of bureaucracy and regulation in favor of economic competitiveness. From the beginning on, and still so, even if the central demand for dissolution of the common european currency was relativized by other topics, the main concern for the party was a national one: the fear of losing economic and political control to some supra- or multinational organisations (AfD 2013). Through several regional and an european election the party elaborated a much broader program. It was enlarged especially with issues of culture, identity and immigration, in all of which the national interest is decidedly pronounced (AfD 2016). Even after the explicitly neoliberal wing left the party in 2015, the social and economic programmatic

3 The folkish-racist nationalism for example of the german Nationaldemokratische Partei bears totally different politico-economic concepts than that of the german Republikaner with its more republican nationalism. Especially in the environment of the former, there were made some attempts to develop a so-called concept of space-oriented political economy which relies on the given area and its potential, regional economic circles and the rejection of a global division of labour. compare NPD 2003

4 A goal that was at least electorally achieved by a referendum in June 2016. Since negotiations about the exit will probably last for quite some time, during which Great Britain will still be present in the EU institutions, the elected UKIP-members of the european parliament will still be working and participation in a europarty itself does not have to be touched necessarily. For these reasons, it's still worth observing UKIP's role in the european political arena.

5 Both of which only appeared in the UKIP 2015 manifesto.

remained much the same. The invigoration of the folkish nationalist wing had relatively little influence on the social and economic positions of the party.

Two parties with closer ties to the historic and contemporary far right are the FN and the FPÖ. A central reason to found the FN in 1972 was the widespread fear at that time among the french centre- and far right, that social movements, trade unions and the established parties and bureaucracies would become too big a threat in the arenas of the bourgeois parliamentarism. The FN countered this with its far right electoral party project and a clear and unambiguous commitment to the free market with the respective demands: reduction of the public expenditure quota, privatization of nationalised businesses as well as sectors of the welfare system. In line with this, the FN explicitly endorsed the next step of european integration: the single european market (Bastow 1997). While the FN discourse during the 1980s was „ultraliberal“ (Camus 2014, 7), that changed with the beginning of the 1990s, when the FN demanded not only for the reintroduction of border controls and tariffs on imports but also for increasing the minimum and low wages. This change seems to have been motivated by a declining french economic power and, regarding its electoral aspirations, by „[...] its growing appeal among working-class and poor voters [...]“ (Shields 1997: 416). As an underlying concept, the FN always promoted a 'national preference'⁶, which implies a primacy of the political over the economy. So it's rather unlikely that neither the previous neoliberalism was pure conviction nor that the protectionist turn was a deep ideological one. Again, not to forget the FN's vote-seeking which also influences its policy's „[...] degree of fluidity, a multifaceted, multitargeted discourse which aims at addressing as many different groups as possible through a pragmatism which at times borders on the conceptually vague.“ (Bastow 1997: 68) Under Marine Le Pen social-protectionist demands, especially put in contrast to european politics, went even further: withdrawal from the Euro, more active economic intervention by the state, renationalisation of agricultural policy and more (Shields 2013). Although her election campaigns still focussed more on traditional right-wing topics, such as national identity, immigration, law-and-order, it seems that the FN effected „[...] a strategic shift on economic policy, developing a left-leaning agenda of anti-capitalism and social welfare provision in response to a growing public demand for social and economic protection.“ (Shields 2014: 502/503)

Until the beginning of the 1990s the FPÖ still had a strong influence of Deutsch-Nationalismus⁷. In 1985, the FPÖ_a adopted a program, which combined national questions with neoliberal ideology and programmatics (FPÖ 1985). Its neoliberal concept of freedom leads subsequently to a critique of the relatively close austrian social partnership and the welfare system in general. The FPÖ was a

⁶ Discourse-strategically changed since 2011 into 'national priority', still meaning the same.

⁷ Deutsch-Nationalismus is a specific austrian ideological movement which favours the Anschluss/annexation to Germany and rejects the concept of an unique austrian nation.

vehement supporter of Austria joining the European Community/Union, not least for the prospect of getting closer with Germany again, in economic as well as in social and cultural terms. The turn to a more austrian-centred nationalist and a resolute anti-european position was motivated more strategically than ideologically: The FPÖ's positions have always been in sharp contrast to the ÖVP/SPÖ, be it the national question, historic issues or the european integration (Frölich-Steffen 2004: 286). So the FPÖ_a could serve the growing social and economic fears which began to arise in relation to the EU and the globalisation. But, even though for the european elections in 2014 it demanded a minimum wage, it didn't substantially move towards more protectionism, on the contrary, it kept up its pure neoliberal demands: rejection of all institutions and functions that limit individual freedom, abolition of the welfare state, tax relief for enterprises, reduction of labour costs, limitation for trade unions, privatisation of housing, education and health. Although only for a short glimpse between 2000 and 2002, it should not be forgotten, that the FPÖ already formed part of a national government once, where it tried to implement its policies more or less successfully. (FPÖ 2005/2011/2014/2015; Pelinka 2002)

The development of the parties shows that a) there is a strong neoliberal undercurrent throughout the far right⁸, which is mostly challenged today by the FN and b) politico-economic conceptions are of no independent value, which is evidenced by the more or less arbitrary incorporation of otherwise inconsistent elements. The politico-economic field is rather subordinated under sociopolitical objectives of a broad spectrum. For the very first, the far right is dedicated to formulate political ideas in the fields of nationalism, xenophobia, (welfare) chauvinism and law-and-order (Mudde 2007⁹). Nonetheless, all of these fields are touching economic questions: The AfD once used the slogan „We are not the the world's social service department“¹⁰ It refers to immigrants and their social security claims as well as to german transfer payments in the context of the european debt crisis. This slogan entangles economic with nationalistic and xenophobic resentiments against all those, that are perceived as dependant from german monetary aid. Above all, the term social service department itself has a common negative connotation, which adds an internal (welfare) chauvinist resentment against people in need to an external one of states in need. The factual economic claim and its implications move back behind other ideological issues. Following this argument, politico-economic ideas of far right parties do not so much orientate on coherent economic paradigms but rather on the different contexts they are active in. For political

8 compare Shui et al 1997; Butterwegge 2006

9 Cas Mudde has developed more exact categories as for example to describe better the subgroup of populist radical right parties. The broadest ideological spectrum, nonetheless, for describing the far/extreme right can be labelled with these terms.

10 original: „Wir sind nicht das Weltsozialamt“; This slogan has already been used before, in a modified form, by the NPD, Pro NRW (another german far right party) and Horst Seehofer, actual prime minister of Bavaria and chairman of the social-christian CSU.

parties and their competitive performance, these contexts are determined by economic facts itself, as for example the national integration into the European division of labour or the current state of crisis phenomena, and by the political opportunity structures, which are also influenced by many non-economic developments. With the following exemplary descriptions of the parties' positioning in recent campaigns shall be shown how the nationalistic narrative determines the use of politico-economic demands. It is necessarily shortened and certainly has to be extended by a more in-depth analysis as well as to other policy fields.

One of the most fierce opponents of the EU-membership in the last years has been UKIP, in the program for the last national elections it even presented a concrete road map for the Brexit (UKIP 2015: 71). While the actual reasons for the exit appear to be of political nature, the road map signals clearly, that all trade and other than as economic perceived agreements with the EU should endure, if possible. Even though the program proclaims several times, that Great Britain is not dependant of the EU, in contrary, it would be better off outside, UKIP definitely knows about the extent of economic integration with EU countries. What UKIP seems to favour, is to keep the actual level of economic integration while not being bound politically anymore. One of its explanations of unemployment and pressure on wages is the freedom of movement for persons and labour force, hence the immigration. A poster in the EP 2014 campaign said „26 million people in Europe are looking for work. And whose jobs are they after?“ The answer was directly given by a finger pointing at the passerbys viewing the poster (UKIP 2014). Regaining the sovereign political power to limit the immigration or to „[a]llow British businesses to choose to employ British citizens first {...“ (UKIP 2015: 41) is an obvious protectionist measure. Countered by the cynical neoliberal demand to reassess the EU working time directive, because it would „[...] actively restrict the British work ethos and therefore our economy [...]“ (ibid.) the dimension of protectionism is clearly more national than social. Regarding public finances, UKIP either makes a populist use of political opportunities, describing them to be in a „mess“ (UKIP 2015: 8), or it deliberately intensifies the neoliberal austerity politics the existing governments are already executing, because in reality the public expenditure quota and the public deficit in relation to the GDP are decreasing almost constantly, but definitely significantly since 2009.¹¹ So, while UKIP makes no secret of the economic integration of GB in the European market, it just interprets it on a nationalistic basis, when it argues, that these economic ties could easily be separated from the political ties. Using the immigration topic so prominently, as it was the case again during the Referendum Campaign in 2016, UKIP functionalizes the existing racist, (welfare) chauvinist and xenophobic resentments as a political opportunity.

11 according to statistics of <https://de.statista.com>

In the EP 2014 campaign, the AfD used the slogan „Swindler, Trafficker, Euro-saviour“.¹² The linguistic triad refers to a German TV series in which criminal cases were presented in order to inform people about possible traps. Putting the European debt politics close to criminals is an entanglement of an economic with a law-and-order discourse, suggesting, widely interpreted, that the European integration process is a crime. To contextualize the slogan further, the overall motto of all AfD campaigns is „Mut zu Deutschland – Courage to Germany“, which, apart of its encircling the „eu“ with the European stars, has a clear nationalistic message. Coming back to economic policies, the petition campaign one year earlier against further financial transfers to Greece¹³ also services and radicalizes a nationalistic public opinion. After years of devastating debt politics especially towards Greece, the topic offers an easy opportunity to mobilize nationalistic and chauvinistic passions among German citizens. Widening the focus again, the whole program for the EP-elections is a plea to get back more control for national politics while its economic and social core is neoliberal (AfD 2014).

The FPÖ too, mounted an anti-EU campaign which relied on a widespread resentment against EU-institutions. One of its central slogans was: „We understand your anger – Too much EU is for no one's good“¹⁴. Besides the fact that the existing anger was exaggerated¹⁵, the FPÖ just recently revealed a good deal of opportunism towards this issue. After openly speculating about an Austrian exit of the EU after the closely lost and to-be-repeated presidential elections, the FPÖ officials rapidly back-pedalled (Die Presse 2016). A few days earlier, interestingly, a surveyed trend was published, that right after the Brexit, the number of opponents of an Austrian EU-membership decreased to 15%.¹⁶ Where the FPÖ's actual agenda is heading, can best be illustrated by its slogan „Zuerst Österreich dann die EU – First Austria then the EU“ and the respective chapters in its program for the EP-elections in 2014. It demands a limitation of the free movement of labour force in order to protect Austrian workers and the cut of any transfers to so-called 'Pleitestaaten' (bankrupt states) in order to protect Austrian finances (FPÖ 2014).

The main slogan of the FN in the EP 2014 campaign was „No to Brussels. Yes to France“¹⁷. Since decades, it is agitating against the European Union and its institutions. Although the FN is constantly gaining popularity, surveys have shown, that the public opinion is not in favour of leaving the Euro zone. Consequently, the FN did not position itself uniformly (Schmid 2014). After the Brexit vote,

12 original: Nepper – Schlepper – Euro-Retter; translation by jr

13 <https://www.change.org/p/stopp-der-zahlungen-an-griechenland-und-offenlegung-von-alternativen>, 30.8. 2016

14 original: Wir verstehen eure Wut - Zu viel EU tut niemand gut; translation by jr

15 According to a survey of the Austrian Society for European Politics the approval of the EU-membership among Austrian citizens at that time was around 65%. <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/%C3%96GFE-time-series-July-2016-2.pdf>, 25.8. 2016

16 <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/blog/2016/07/08/oegfe-survey-after-the-brexit-vote-desire-to-leave-the-eu-is-decreasing-in-austria/>

17 original: Non à Bruxelles. Oui à la France“; translation by jr

Marine Le Pen once again called for a French referendum about the French EU-membership (Le Pen 2016). Even though the consequences of the Brexit are not fully visible yet, she probably incorporates the dynamic opportunities that were initiated by the 'victory' of British EU-sceptics and, speculation, tries to prolong them until the presidential elections in the spring of 2017. This nationalistic perspective is perfectly in line with the discourse, which the FN, especially under Marine Le Pen, established with regards to social and economic questions. It's noteworthy, how every single issue in the actual political program of the FN is linked with questions of missing national sovereignty, be it the immigration, the globalisation or tax issues. No matter what positions the party takes, more liberal or more protectionist, the concept of national priority can be found throughout every issue (FN 2011). Against this background, the frontist anti-EU position seems plausible, even though France, as one of the founding nations of the European integration process, is well integrated into the European division of labour, exporting and importing more than the half of its respective total with other EU countries.¹⁸

As shown, a lot of varying politico-economic fragments are put together by those parties, rather conducted by their regional or national political opportunity structures than by hard economic facts, not to mention by any coherent alternative. It should be researched more intensely, if there are actually attempts, whether on the national or on the European level, to develop politico-economic theories and/or positions which could embrace a broader spectrum of the far right and, above all, gain strategic relevance for them. For this purpose, it would be interesting too, which think tanks or networks are explicit addressees for the far right and vice versa.

A case which has been left aside until now is the far right incorporation in governments. Only at the transition from relatively free contrivable demands to political responsibility can be evidenced, which elements of politico-economic ideas are valued high enough to be pursued as politics. Above that, an in-depth-analysis could also reveal important data about the direction and impact of far right politics on a subnational level, i.e. in municipal or regional parliaments and governments. Thereby will also get evident, which interests the party is really bound to. Probably the most interesting case is the Hungarian Fidesz, which is in government since 2010. Its economic policies and politics are described by Becker (2015) as a selective economic nationalism with a heterodox mix of measures. While it uses protectionist measures to protect and strengthen certain domestic capital fractions, it is also pursuing genuine neoliberal policies to preserve and endorse the export industry. The protectionist measures encompassed a private debt policy which directly opposed the interests of foreign banks and even some EU institutions, the state's intervention in parts of the financial industry and the central bank, the renationalization of the pension care, the increase of public

¹⁸ according to statistics of <https://de.statista.com>

spending in construction and specific service sectors and sectoral extra taxes. Neoliberal measures encompassed the further endorsement of foreign investments in export-oriented sectors, an uniform income tax, the reduction of business taxes and the implementation of a rigid workfare regime (Becker 2015). With all these measures and the respective „national-emancipatory rhetoric“ (Lang 2015: 4; translated by jr) the objectives of the Fidesz government are wholly motivated to build up a new hungarian bourgeoisie with domestic capital. The use of heterodox elements seems to be justified by internal and external necessities. Apart from its social exclusionary effects, a moderate increase of its economic power and the relative consolidation of public finances (Lang 2015: 5) seem to legitimize the Fidesz government. In its conglomeration of most different politico-economic measures it does not differ very much from the concepts of the parties described above but proves that a pluralism of actually inconsistent elements does work in reality.

Consequently, the question whether the bundle of politico-economic ideas of the extreme right is a suitable pluralism or a cumulation of inconsistencies cannot be answered generally. To become more concrete, it has to be analyzed whether there are divisions in politico-economic questions a) within the parties and b) between those parties who try to cooperate transnationally with the aim to become a single actor. On top, far right demands and the policy and politics of the bloc in power have to be analyzed with regard to how they mutually influence and presuppose each other.

The paper, at its best, should have pointed out on an exemplary basis, that politico-economic ideas are subordinated to other topics of the far right. It gains strength and persuasive power by entangling it with other societal relevant discourses, such as the immigration issue. On a discourse-political level it therefore is of utmost importance to reveal these entanglements and to uncover the actual interests. On a non-discursive level, that is in Realpolitik, happens the same. Nationalism is no unique feature of the far right, but one of almost the whole political spectrum. The european parties in power, be it christian conservative or social democratic have all made extensive use of entangling their nationalism with neoliberal economics, once in a while ruptured by protectionist measures, if necessary. It was Gerhard Schröder, german social democrat and chancellor from 1998 to 2005, who proclaimed that the Agenda 2010, a significant neoliberal cut in the german social systems, would bring germany back to the top, through welfare and work, until the end of the past decade. (Schröder 2003: 2481)¹⁹ The politics of the Fidesz government draw a more radical picture: While the economic nationalism is aimed at building up and strengthening the hungarian capital, it not only strongly enforces an authoritarian workfare regime but also limitates the democratic culture and intensifies the division between various social groups. No matter what measures, nationalism was never meant

¹⁹ original: Unsere Agenda 2010 enthält weitreichende Strukturreformen. Diese werden Deutschland bis zum Ende des Jahrzehnts bei Wohlstand und Arbeit wieder an die Spitze bringen.; translated by jr

to equal the differences between classes. Therefore, analyzing the politics of the reigning bloc in power gives a good hint, on which level of societal division the far right can build up.

It seems to be a commonplace, but the strength of the right also relies always on the weakness of the left. This is not meant to promote a more nationalistic or populist left which quasi inversely tries to gain popularity among the objectively or perceived frustrated left-behinds. On the contrary, a really up-to-date emancipatory left movement has to be post-national in the broadest sense. Although a global claim has to be the premise, a start at the european level would also do and give it a realistic frame. The political conditions for pan-european organizations are given. The level of democratization would have to be addressed first. That would mean a significant increase of competences for the european parliament to begin with. A Strengthened budgetary and legislative power would result in a widened political-material significance of EP decisions. If a stronger left achieved a fundamental renunciation of the actual authoritarian austerity course and presented socially and economically well-grounded alternatives, the right would be seriously challenged. But this, as Bale (2003) suggests, might include to rethink some frontiers that were built up between the mainstream and other, more progressive factions of the left in order to unfold the maximum potential against a rightist bloc that already is on its way of collaborating wherever possible.

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