

# Xenophobic Populism in Europe and the Threat It Poses to the Rules-based International Order

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## Issue

Right-wing populist parties in Europe are co-opting anti-immigrant sentiments and utilizing the negative effects of globalization to create suspicion of and hostility towards elites, mainstream politics and established democratic institutions that threaten Canada's core interests with key democratic allies.

## Background

### **Xenophobic Populism Poisons the Well**

The recent rise of populist parties in Europe demonstrates an alarming public response to decades of undemocratic liberal policies (Mudde 2016). Populism, while not inherently xenophobic, has in recent years taken on an anti-immigrant and illiberal tone, as political parties have co-opted the recent migration crisis in Europe, Brexit and anti-EU sentiment with the negative effects of globalization to create and emphasize a suspicion of and hostility towards elites, mainstream politics and established institutions (Zakaria 2016). The populist surge is not unique to Europe; xenophobic populism will affect Canada too, as an alarming recent trend indicates heightened negative attitudes towards migrants (Global News 2019). Xenophobic populism spreads across borders, emphasizing the urgent need for Canada to act to protect its values and democratic institutions both domestically and abroad.

Populism generally arises amidst economic and social insecurities (Vieten and Poynting 2016). Populist rhetoric is anti-elite and portrays established institutions as “out of touch” with the common people. Populism further looks to establish scapegoats for society's plight, often blaming migrants or foreigners as threats to the way of life (ibid.). Europe has struggled with populism since the 1960s, but only recently with the disproportionate effects of globalization has the phenomenon taken a radical and xenophobic tone, blaming both the European Union and irregular migrants as causes for economic disparity. States such as Poland and Hungary have elected right-wing populist parties that radiate anti-immigrant sentiments (Kalan 2018; Becker 2010). France's recent surge of “yellow-vests” demonstrates the percolating populist trend even in liberal democracies, as citizens begin to turn against established institutions due to economic disparities (BBC News2018).

Specific reasons for the rise of populism may differ, but there are four recurring characteristics that can be attributed to populism, regardless of political leaning. Described by Ben Rowsell (2019), populism is anti-democratic, despite claiming to be for the people, because it creates division, monopolizes the media, blames outsiders and dismantles institutions. These aspects of populism are harnessed by political parties to gain momentum among constituents because they blame current political elites, the established institutions and

foreigners as the reasons for economic and social woes, emphasizing nativist rhetoric (Vieten and Poynting 2016).

Xenophobic populism creates division, uses marginalized societies as scapegoats and resents diversity. As such, Canada has a duty to protect democracy and the rights and freedoms that are fundamental to Canadian values.

### **The Retreat of Multiculturalism and Recent Trends in Europe**

The retreat of multiculturalism throughout the European Union has contributed to the rise of xenophobic populism. Since the early 2000s, a considerable backlash has been levied against institutional frameworks and political interventions designed to reduce discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, overcome barriers to participation in society and recognize cultural identities. Multiculturalism, once viewed as the cure for social issues, is increasingly viewed as the leading cause of Europe's social problems (Malik 2015). This shift in perception has led a number of politicians to actively denounce multicultural practices: Angela Merkel in a 2015 speech called multiculturalism a sham, causing a backlash among right-wing and populist parties, such as the National Front in France and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, that contributed to their xenophobic rhetoric (Noack 2015; Malik 2015). Despite the apparent public backlash, research shows that the supposed retreat of multiculturalism has occurred at the level of discourse, rather than at a policy level, with only immigrant multiculturalism seeing any serious repercussions (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Political leaders and groups throughout Europe have capitalized on growing public distrust and anger towards migrants to generate anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural talking points. Their messaging is often factually inaccurate, blaming migrants for declines in employment and other societal ills.

Critics of multiculturalism have argued that rather than promote diversity, multicultural immigration practices have led to isolated societies and ultimately failed to assimilate migrants into their new nations (Noack 2015). Merkel's denouncement of multicultural practices came at a time when the German public had grown increasingly wary of the influx of new refugees. Similarly, in France national identity and immigration have increasingly become more politicized, as seen in the creation of the Minister for Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and Co-Development in May 2007 and during the 2012 and

2017 presidential elections (Villard and Sayegh 2013). Questions surrounding the integration of migrants and criticism over the number of migrants allowed into the country have further weakened support for immigrant multicultural policies. The reduction of multicultural immigrant policies among EU allies has only served to further problematize longstanding challenges posed by increased flows of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Recent trends indicate that France and Germany are "most likely" at risk of developing a populist government. Both states received a significant influx of migrants and asylum seekers during the 2015-2016 EU migrant crisis and have demonstrated difficulty in addressing migrant integration. Germany took the greatest share of migrants of any EU country over the past few years and became the world's largest recipient of new individual applications, with asylum claims peaking at 722,400 in 2016 (The UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR] 2017). France became the fifth-largest recipient with 78,400 new individual asylum claims in 2016 (ibid.). As a result of the influx, there was a public backlash towards Merkel's open-door policy to refugees (Tartar 2017). This backlash towards migrants can be seen in both Germany and France, particularly due to the lack of sufficient economic integration. In France, as a result of its nine percent structural unemployment rate, 15.4 percent of foreign-born individuals are unemployed (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2019a). In terms of social integration, indicators of unemployment and racial discrimination suggest that the French republican model of integration has become less effective as immigrant communities in France live in ghettos where there are high rates of violence, drugs and unemployment (Barou 2014). On the other hand, while Germany has better migrant economic integration than France, foreign-born unemployment continues to be higher than native-born, as it accounts for 6.4 percent of unemployment while native-born unemployment accounts for only 3.3 percent (OECD 2019b). Migrants in Germany also face a higher risk of poverty and lack of affordable housing (OECD 2018). Both countries have also suffered from high rates of hate crimes related to racism and xenophobia. For instance, Germany recorded 1,860 hate crimes related to racism and xenophobia in 2017 and France recorded 882 related to racism and xenophobia (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] Hate Crime Reporting 2017a; OSCE Hate Crime Reporting 2017b).

While neither Germany nor France currently has a populist party in power, both states have seen national populist parties gain considerable momentum in the most recent elections. In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) made history this year by becoming the first right-wing party to enter the Bundestag since the early 1950s (Tartar 2017). The AfD was able to double its voter share to 12.6 percent by challenging Chancellor Merkel's decision to let in around 1.3 million undocumented migrants and refugees, and pushing for strict anti-immigrant policies while creating anxieties over the influence of Islam (ibid.; BBC News 2019). France's National Front party gained a third of the popular vote in the 2017 elections by targeting globalization, Islamic fundamentalism and mass immigration (Tartar 2017).

### Canada's Role in Addressing Xenophobic Populism

Canada has consistently demonstrated a profound commitment to promoting multilateral diplomacy and leadership on international issues to maintain peace and security (Global Affairs Canada [GAC] 2017). This includes constructive engagement with like-minded countries in Europe to combat global issues and to encourage other nations to adhere to international law (ibid.). President Trump's isolationist policies have created a void in the international liberal order that provides Canada with the opportunity to assume a greater global responsibility to protect democratic values and the rule of law. By forming an alliance with its like-minded allies, Canada can become an international "rule-shaper" (Daalder and Lindsay 2018).

Xenophobic populism limits the Canadian government's ability in promoting inclusive policies. Canada and its democratic allies share a commitment to advance and protect democracy, freedom and human rights for mutual peace and prosperity (ibid.). Xenophobic populism threatens these commitments as the rhetoric emphasizes division and intolerance of marginalized societies (Rowswell 2019). Germany and France have traditionally been two of Canada's strategic partners within Europe. There is an opportunity for Canada to lead constructive engagement with Europe in order to combat populism and promote peaceful pluralism, inclusion and respect for diversity. GAC's mandate emphasizes expanding Canada's diplomatic and leadership roles globally by promoting democratic values, emphasizing diversity and inclusion of marginalized societies, and protecting the rules-based

international order by engaging in multilateral diplomacy (GAC 2018). Our policy recommendations aim to combat xenophobic populism by engaging with existing EU partners to protect democracy.

## Recommendations

- 1. Propose the inclusion of xenophobic populism as a security dimension at the OSCE.** Populist parties and authoritarian demagogues have gained power at a national level in Brazil, Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, Turkey and the United States, undermining democratic institutions and norms. This democratic backsliding is a threat to global security. With growing American isolationism, it is important that Canada engage with like-minded Western democratic allies to prevent the erosion of the international rules-based international order and promote democratic values abroad. The inclusion of xenophobic populism as a security issue would add an important element to existing security concerns and recognize the growing threat xenophobic populism poses to democracy and a unified Europe.
- 2. Create and lead a coalition dedicated to promoting and protecting the rules-based international order and democratic values.** Inspired by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay's concept of the "Committee to Save the World Order," we propose that Canada spearhead a summit with its allies to encourage open dialogue that strengthens the rules-based international order (Daalder and Lindsay 2018). Through existing international institutions, Canada can lead a forum to promote and protect democratic principles that are being threatened by xenophobic populist rhetoric. By forming an alliance with its like-minded allies, Canada can become an international "rule-shaper" (ibid.). The coalition's purpose would be to combat the four tactics used by populist parties by encouraging strength in diversity. This would include promoting inclusion by offering open participation for states to join the alliance, emphasizing the economic and social benefits of migrant integration, and engaging in the development and maintenance of democratic institutions, such as the rule of law and civil society (Rowswell 2019).

3. **Address xenophobic populism by developing a report that exposes political leaders and/or groups who espouse populist rhetoric.** By naming and shaming, we can halt the normalization of xenophobic populist rhetoric. Canada has already demonstrated leadership in this area by naming Myanmar for committing genocide against the Rohingya Muslims (CTV News 2019). Naming xenophobic populist leaders, collectively with our allies, could be an effective tool to stopping populist rhetoric and holding governments more accountable for their inability to protect people's rights. Following a model based on the yearly U.S. Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report*,<sup>1</sup> Canada should engage European governments to combat xenophobic populist rhetoric.
4. **Recognize the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's (CERD's) jurisdiction to receive individual petitions regarding alleged breaches of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.** CERD has made numerous recommendations to Canada to make a declaration under Article 14 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which recognizes the jurisdiction of CERD to receive individual petitions alleging breaches of the Convention (Amnesty International 2012). We suggest that Canada follow this recommendation as it has set a precedent in accepting other individual petition procedures relating to other conventions such as the UN Human Rights Committee, the UN Committee against Torture and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to consider cases (ibid.). By adopting this declaration, Canada would demonstrate solidarity with other like-minded democratic European countries by ensuring their commitment to the fight against xenophobic populism at home as well as abroad, and enhance their leadership in the international world order.

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