



*Michael Minkenberg*

# **The Radical Right in Europe: An Overview**

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# Preface

European challenges call for European responses. The spread of extremist and xenophobic attitudes and the proliferation of right-wing political movements are challenges confronting all of Europe. These countries can learn from each other as they seek ways of dealing with such extremism. This applies particularly to Germany, where the public debate has paid far too little attention to the successful strategies and experiences of other countries. As Europe becomes more unified, sharing knowledge about existing strategies for combating right-wing radicalism and attitudes in the neighboring countries becomes increasingly important for every European country.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is contributing to this European debate. It has commissioned Professor Michael Minkenberg, who is one of the leading experts in this field, to write a comparative report. The report provides a conceptual framework for comparing right-wing radicalism in Europe and includes country specific data on the right-wing radicalism and extremism. His report constitutes a solid base of knowledge on the current situation in ten European countries. It gives us an overview of right-wing radical political party successes, the strength of their movements, the existence of sub-cultural milieus of the radical right and of corresponding factors that influence the rise of the radical right in Europe.

The selected countries in this report vary in terms of democratic systems and immigration policies. Austria, Germany and Switzerland are consensus democracies (which means there are many political and institutional checks and balances) that have restrictive immigra-

tion policies. Belgium and the Netherlands are in the same category of consensus democracies but the former pursues a moderate immigration policy whereas the latter has until recently implemented an open immigration policy when it comes to immigration control. In contrast, the study examines Great Britain and France with majoritarian systems with little checks and balances. But the two countries differ in their immigration policies—Great Britain's is considered to be moderate, the one in France is open. Denmark, Italy and Sweden have mixed democratic systems: the executive is restricted by a certain degree by political or institutional factors. Nevertheless, all three employ different immigration policies. Denmark is restrictive, Italy moderate and Sweden is open. Altogether this selection provides us with diverse country cases where the regulation of the immigration flow varies and the number of political actors that influence decisions is different. Both factors do have an impact on how right-wing extremism is addressed by mainstream politics and society.

This report will be followed by further research. The focus will be on how the selected countries are combating right-wing radicalism at the national level. The main interest of the Bertelsmann Stiftung is: to push forward a European exchange about successful strategies against right-wing extremism and to help Germany learn from its neighbors in a field vital to the stability of democracy. We are much obliged for Professor Minkenberg's contribution to this goal.

*Ulrich Kober*

*Orkan Kösemen*

# 1 Introduction

The purpose of this report is not to provide a novel piece of research for an academic or wider audience but to offer country-specific data and a few conceptual thoughts and contextual comparative data on the radical right in Europe, which are needed in order to arrive at ideas of how to manage analytically and confront politically its various manifestations. What are the central dimensions of the challenge at hand?

1. The contemporary radical right is a modern phenomenon. It has undergone a phase of renewal as a result of social and cultural modernization shifts in post-war Europe, or has emerged as a truly new phenomenon in the course of regime change in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. Thus today's radical right is only vaguely connected with previous versions. Terms like "fascism" or "neo-fascism," which suggest a historical continuity from Munich to Mölln, Magdeburg and Marzahn in Germany, or from Vichy to Vitrolles in France, become increasingly obsolete.
2. The contemporary radical right is an international phenomenon. Thus, more than before, comparative approaches are needed both to analyze the cross-national aspects and to specify the nation-specific characteristics. Still, even in some comparative work, definitions of the radical right prevail which derive their criteria from the respective national traditions. More than ever before, the study of the radical right, even in a particular country, should consider international contexts in which the radical right operates.
3. The contemporary radical right is a complex phenomenon. Twenty years ago, Klaus von Beyme advised: "Future studies of right-wing

extremism will have to pay more attention to the whole political context of this political movement instead of being preoccupied with traditional party and electoral studies” (von Beyme 1988: 16). This is still valid, at least in the field of the comparative study of the radical right which requires combining party research with other strands of research (movement research, youth sociology) in order to do justice to the complex nature of the radical right and the ensuing challenge (for recent reviews of the party literature on the radical right, see Carter 2005, Kitschelt 2007 and Mudde 2007).

4. The radical right’s renewal, internationality, and multidimensionality should also inform the question of how to deal with the radical right. Often, a focus on particular aspects (such as party strategies or a criminalization of the radical right) dominates the debates, or national viewpoints prevail, such as the German tendency to “judicialize” political issues and to follow the logic of constitutional and legal concepts, as in the German *Verfassungsschutz*.

The following report on ten selected European democracies (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland) highlights the characteristics of the radical right in these countries and provide contextual information regarding their demographic characteristics and sociopolitical environment. The selection of these countries was primarily guided by the criteria of variation in the radical right’s political success and organization (i.e., variation in electorate support, in strength of parties, in movement-type mobilization) and variation in the countries’ contextual characteristics. The list of countries is by no means exhaustive and it does not include other relevant cases such as Norway, Spain or Poland. Also, the report does not attempt to analyze the reasons behind the radical right’s success or failure in these countries. It is organized in four sections: first, an overview of the major demographic facts and trends; second, a discussion of the political performance of the radical right; third, a characterization of the sociopolitical environment of the radical right; and fourth, a few words on the state of data collection in each country.



The country chapters are preceded by a general comparative overview and a brief sketch of the German and Polish cases, which have been dealt with extensively elsewhere (Minkenberg et al. 2006), and, in the case of Germany, been part of an earlier project funded by the Bertelsmann Stiftung. The final portion of this document returns to a more comparative perspective and brings together contextual factors and variation, as well as country-specific characteristics of the radical right.

The author thanks Stephan Redlich (European-University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder) and Alisa Shadrin (New York University) for their contributions to this report, both in research and in editing. This report is part of the project “Strategies against right-wing extremism in Europe” of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Gütersloh, Germany.

## 2 Concepts and Contexts

### Terms and concepts: research on the radical right

Definitions of right-wing radicalism (or extremism for those who prefer this term) vary widely.<sup>1</sup> One way to overcome the shopping list quality of many definitions is to tie them to theoretical concepts of social change which underlie most analyses of the radical right. The logic of modernization theories provides some conceptually grounded criteria for comparative purposes which can be applied to Western democracies as well as new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Generally, modernization can be understood as a growing autonomy of the individual—status mobility and role flexibility—and an ongoing functional differentiation of the society—segmentation and growing autonomy of societal subsystems (Rucht 1994).

In this light, right-wing radicalism can be defined as the radical effort to undo or fight such social change by radicalizing inclusionary and exclusionary criteria (Minkenberg 1998: 29–47, *idem* 2000; Carter 2005: 14–20; Kitschelt 2007: 1179). The counter-concept to social differentiation is the nationally defined community, and the counter-concept to individualization is the return to traditional roles and status of the individual in such a community. It is the overemphasis on, or radicalization of, images of social homogeneity which characterizes radical right-wing thinking. In other words, right-wing radicalism is defined as a political ideology, the core element of which is a myth of a homogenous nation, a romantic and populist

ultra-nationalism which is directed against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principles of individualism and universalism.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that the mobilization of the radical right often occurs in times of accelerated social and cultural change provides a fruitful starting point for explaining right-wing radical mobilization in both Western Europe (before and after 1989) and Eastern Europe (after 1989). In the West, a renewal of the radical right has occurred, which can be understood as a result of a general modernization shift in the wake of “1968” and specific mobilization shifts in the context of each country’s opportunity structures (Minkenberg 2000). The modernization shift includes a transition of Western industrial societies into a phase of “post-industrialism” and a new political dynamism that opened opportunities for new movements and parties on the left and right along a new, value- or culturally-based cleavage, with the parties on the right mobilizing the “normal pathological” right-wing potential (Scheuch and Klingemann 1967).

This new radical right—the “third wave” of right-wing radicalism in post-war Western democracies (von Beyme 1988; Carter 2005; Minkenberg 1998)—is not simply the extension of conservatism towards the extreme end of the spectrum but is also the product of a restructuring of the political spectrum and a regrouping of political actors and alliances. Ideologically and sociologically, it represents the right-wing pole of a new conflict axis which cuts across the established lines of partisan conflict and societal cleavages. Politically, it performs a bridging function between an established conservatism and an explicitly anti-democratic, latently or openly violent right-wing extremism. The new radical right is distinguished from the old by its softening of anti-democratic rhetoric and playing according to the rules of the game and by its advocating ethnocentrism rather than classical biological racism. Its electoral base, especially the growing number of working class voters, signifies a new place in the changing structures of party competition and cleavages. In terms of its support, the new radical right does not simply represent “modernization losers” since most of their supporters are not

“losers” in any objective sense. These supporters are an ideologically motivated segment of the public which reacts to social and cultural changes (Kitschelt 1995) by trying to slow down the effects of these changes, and by overcoming their own insecurities by scapegoating minorities, immigrants, leftists, feminists and others as threats to the integrity of the national community. As such, these voters or supporters are modernization opponents or “subjective” modernization losers.

For a comparative analysis of the radical right covering West and East, as well as for the development and evaluation of strategies to combat it, some fundamental distinctions along ideological and organizational lines should be observed.

*Ideology:* The comparative literature offers two basic approaches: the “one world” approach, and the “many worlds” approach. Among the former are those who postulate one generic phenomenon, like Lipset’s extremism of the center (1963), Griffin’s fascism (1991), Betz’s right-wing populism (1994) or Mudde’s populist radical right (2007). The other camp has embedded ideological distinctions in the concept itself, such as Ignazi’s distinction between the classical extreme right and the post-industrialist extreme right (2003), Kitschelt’s typology of fascism, welfare chauvinism, anti-statist populism, and new radical right (1995) or Carter’s five-group typology of neo-nazi parties, neo-fascist parties, authoritarian xenophobic parties, neo-liberal xenophobic parties, and neo-liberal populist parties (2005: 50–51). Following my own and Ignazi’s reasoning that a fundamental ideological dividing line determines whether today’s radical right embraces historical movements, ideologies or regimes of Nazism or fascism, or whether it advocates a more contemporary racist or ethnocentrist nationalism, allowing for a more populist and less extreme version of the radical right, and introducing the element of a religion-based exclusionism, a fourfold typology is suggested. This typology combines various aspects of the other ideological typologies in the literature and follows the aforementioned modernization-theoretical argument in that the ideological variants can be identified according to the respective concept of nation and the ex-