



VIEWPOINT

Not economy but extremism is threatening Europe's future

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Abstract

As the European Union focuses all attention and energy to confront its serious economic and financial crisis which is well nigh threatening its integration process, it would be unwise to sideline other equally potent forces of European disintegration such as political chauvinism and extremism. In fact, it is more important for the Europeans to manage cultural, national, and religious pluralisms than to focus all their energy on solving the current financial crisis.

Keywords: European Union, financial crisis, nationalism, political extremism, political geography, regional integration

Extremists and populist movements are exploiting people's fear of those who are not like us. We can see the consequences in the form of terrorism and racially motivated violence (Kjell Magne Bondevik)

Introduction

Recently, there have appeared several scholarly opinions and statements that claim that the European Union facing serious economic and financial crisis is slowly approaching its end of integration process which started in the aftermath of the Second World War. Indeed, significant number of the EU member states are facing damaging financial crisis which is causing serious damage to the stabilization and coherence of the EU as a whole. While Greece as the most indebted member state is saved bankrupt with the help of the IMF and EU financial means, other countries such as Italy, Spain, and even Portugal are under a threat to face similar fate. Thus, it seems that the future of the idea of European integration is at stake over current financial crisis in several member states. As the German Chancellor Angela Merkel pointed out, Europe is threatened with its gravest modern crisis and the EU's future is on the line in the Greek emergency (Traynor, 2010). Indeed, the European countries are facing one of the most difficult economic and financial crisis since the Great Depression in 1929.

Still, it would be naïve to sideline other more important problem across Europe, and that is extreme political groups that threaten the idea of democratic, open, and multicultural Europe. Although financial problems are important obstacle to the Europe's future the popularity of the extremist rightist parties and movements across Europe are the most significant threat to the Europe's integration, peace and prosperity. The central argument of this viewpoint is that it is more important for the Europeans to manage cultural, national, and religious pluralism than to focus all their energy on solving financial crisis.

Institutional framework of non-discrimination

When European leaders decided to establish the European community in 1950s one of the aims in their strategic intentions has been prevention of war and conflicts among European nation states. Furthermore, important objective was to marginalize and decrease the power and influence of the extreme political groups through mutual dialogue and institutional integration. Thus, the idea of European integration, among other things, can to a very significant extent result in deterioration of nationalist parties and marginalization of extremist political movements. That is, many Western scholars and policy makers have believed that democratization and European integration will eventually render nationalism obsolete (Csergo & Goldgeier, 2006). In addition, together with a number of international organizations protecting human rights and freedoms, the parliaments and governments of the EU member states have several times declared zero tolerance against the fascist and extremist parties and movements. In a similar fashion, the EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy has issued a stark warning against growing nationalism, populism and anti-democratic forces across the EU, suggesting that the threat to peace in Europe remains a key issue (Phillips, 2010). In fact, preventing the rise of fascist and extreme groups institutionally the European Union has become the peace community in which there were not any war since the World War II. Bearing in mind the fact that there are a number of wars and conflicts across globe even today in 21st century the historic moment and importance of the peace community in Europe are better understood.

Additionally, the European Union (EU) is committed to promoting human rights, peace, equality, and non-discrimination. The fight against racism and discrimination lies at the heart of that commitment. In fact, the EU is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, principles which are common to all the member states. The EU is bound by its treaties to promote human rights, democratization and non-discrimination. Thus, the EU equality legislation consists of a series of Directives. They ban discrimination on various grounds, including race and gender, in fields such as employment, education and access to goods and services. They also require member states to set up an organisation – such as an ombudsman or other body – to promote equal treatment and assist potential discrimination victims (Eurasia Review, 2011). What's more, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) was established by the EU during 1997 as part of the EU's aim to combat racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism more effectively at a European level. Overall, there exists all-encompassing legal and institutional framework which tends to cement the idea of Europe defending religious, national and cultural diversity. Still, we should look what is happening on the ground? Is the European Union indeed genuine multicultural and democratic community or is the idea of multiculturalism dead in Europe as some European leaders and scholars tried to prove?

Extremist tendencies across Europe

Although the EU has adopted significant legal framework that prevents discrimination on the basis of nation, race, sex, and religion there are serious and threatening signs that extremism and nationalism are still significant values across the European Union member states. Especially, due to current economic crisis across European Union the far-right extremist parties are playing on the card of anti-immigrant, islamophobia, and xenophobia. Naturally, migrants are the scapegoats on which burdens of the European integration and economic degradation due to the global economic process are loaded (Elmas, 2008). Probably the freshest example of rise and popularity of extreme movements across Europe were deadly attacks in Norway motivated by hatred of Muslims and foreigners in general. In addition, in recent years European Union member countries have seen growing support for right-wing populist groups (Spiegel, 2011). Analysing the European elections in 2009, Waterfield claims that “as well as picking up two seats in Britain, anti-immigrant, extremist and previously fringe parties stepped into the political vacuum with significant gains in the Netherlands, Austria, Hungary, Finland, Greece and Romania” (2009). Also, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström claims that as popularity of xenophobic parties rises that creates a very negative environment, and sadly there are too few leaders today who stand up for diversity and for the importance of having open, democratic and tolerant societies where everybody is welcome (Spiegel, 2011).

In many of the EU countries the populist extremist parties are playing increasingly important role in the government decision-making. Better to say, “contrary to assumptions in the 1980s and 1990s that the emergence of PEPs [populist extremist parties] in Europe could be nothing more than a flash in the pan, these parties continue to rally large and durable levels of support. They have joined national coalition governments. They have surfaced in countries with a tradition of extremist politics, as well as those that were previously thought immune. They emerged before the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the recent financial crisis” (Goodwin, 2011). Even in Sweden, one of the most democratic countries in the world, a far-right party has won seats in parliament in general elections in 2010 for the first time (BBC, 2010). The Sweden Democrats, or SD, got 6 percent of the votes and will take 20 of the 349 seats, and are known for their anti-immigrant and anti-Islam views and statements. What’s more important is that the Sweden Democrats have their roots in a racist organisation focused solely on throwing all immigrants and refugees out of the country (Rayman, 2010). Then, Geert Wilders and his far-right anti-Islamic immigrant party are probably the most known European anti-immigrant party worldwide. The biggest winners in the 2009 European Parliament elections in the Netherlands were the two most outspoken parties: Geert Wilders' nationalist anti-EU party and the firmly pro-EU social-liberal party D66 (Kievit, 2009). Furthermore, in the Dutch elections held on June 2010 the Wilders' party more than doubled its score, rising to become the third party in the Dutch parliament with 24 of the 150 seats (Ames, 2010). Ian Traynor argues that:

Similar shifts have already occurred in Austria with the late Joerg Haider, with the Danish People's party in Copenhagen, with the Northern League in Italy or the National Front in France, where the political mainstream has moved to the right to accommodate the extreme right and co-opt some of their supporters (2010).

Furthermore, recently there have emerged threatening statements from influential European leaders and scholars that multiculturalism in Europe is unworthy and impossible project. Although such statements and views are clearly in conflicts with the values such as democracy, unity in diversity, tolerance and plurality that Europe has been supporting for so long. The most known case that initiated debates around Europe on the idea of multiculturalism was when the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, on October 2010 speaking to a meeting of young members of her Christian Democratic Union, claimed that Germany's attempts to create a multicultural society have “utterly failed”. In fact, she concluded that, "This [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed," (Weaver, 2010). Probably Merkel just told something that is in minds of a number of European leaders. Thus, British leader David Cameron at a security conference in Munich in February 2011 stated that the "doctrine of multiculturalism" has failed in a Britain that encourages "different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream" (Marquand, 2011). The next European leader in row was the French leader Nicolas Sarkozy who in summer 2010 claimed that multiculturalism was dead as the French faced serious social and economic problems with immigrants and Gypsies (Marquand, 2011). Thus, the problem is that some European leaders accuse foreigners instead of identifying deficiencies in integration model they adopt. Thus, referring to French controversial integration model Chrisafis points out that:

Under the republican model, multiculturalism is seen as taboo. In France, once a French citizen you leave cultural and ethnic differences at the border and are theoretically seamlessly assimilated into the republic. Everyone is equal before a state that is blind to colour, race and religion. Ethnic minorities do not officially exist as it is illegal to classify and count people by ethnicity. But the glaring gap between the theory and the reality of discrimination is becoming a problem in France.

Still, there have been democratic voices across Europe which sincerely are in favour of multicultural, multinational and democratic Europe in which ideal “unity in diversity” will be realised in practice, and not only used as a political tool. Claude Dilain, the Socialist mayor of Clichy, said the problems of marginalisation in diverse French suburbs had not been addressed over the last five years and the tinderbox of more urban rioting could go off at any time (Chrisafis, 2010). In addition, Wilfried Martens, a former Belgian prime minister who leads the European People's party which

groups ruling Christian democrats in most of the EU, made approaches to social democrat and liberal leaders with the aim of forging a joint anti-extremist position (Traynor, 2010). Following the horrific terrorist attacks in Norway in July 2011 carried out by Anders Breivik, the leader of Germany's center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), Sigmar Gabriel, said that, "In a society where anti-Islam and the discrimination of others has become acceptable again, and in which the middle class applauds the likes of (controversial author) Thilo Sarrazin, there will naturally be lunatics on the fringes of society who feel legitimized in taking stronger action" (Spiegel, 2011). Further, Lagendijk points out that, the large majority of European citizens still do not vote for these [extremist] parties (2010). As Mile Lasic points out, "we should ask ourselves whether possible answers are hidden perhaps in the complex EU's political, cultural, and economic workshop in the form of a new political culture regarding the questions about prematurely proclaimed death of multiculturalism?" (2011). Can indeed the EU provide a model for coexistence of different cultures, nations, religions, etc.?

Conclusion and recommendations

As the European countries recently have faced serious economic and financial crisis most of the scholarly debates are focused on solving the Eurozone problems as the most triggering challenges for the future of supranational and multicultural Europe. However, in this paper my central argument is that it is more important for the Europeans to manage cultural, national, and religious pluralism than to focus all their energy on solving financial crisis.

In other words, if the EU disintegrate and wither away it will be because of dynamism and popularity of extreme rightist political parties and radical anti-immigrant movements among the European citizens rather than deep financial crisis. What's more important, while economic and financial crisis may result in negative economic and material repercussions for the European nations extremist movements across Europe can bring about long-term consequences for whole humankind as would such a situation confirm the theory of the Clash of Civilizations proposed by political scientist Samuel Huntington, that people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post- Cold War era. So, today's economic crisis is a test for a European leaders and their citizenship as well, and they should all together produce models of integrating foreigners into European societies. Otherwise, the idea of multiculturalism as a universal ideal could come under serious threat in Europe resulting in a rise of hatred and mistrust between nations and religions worldwide. We should all work hard in order to spread the value and significance of multiculturalism as a win-win game for all.

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