

# Politics in Western Europe Post COVID-19

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**MARCH 2020**

OPINION ARTICLE

In the post COVID-19 world populists will grow stronger and louder.

COVID-19 was reported on, but largely ignored by the Western World until it hit Europe and North America harder than anyone could have ever predicted. WHO has declared Europe to be the epi-centre for COVID-19 and the Dow Jones has on multiple occasions reported an emergency trading stop – and suffered an historic one-day drop of 12,9%.

Once the world has been able to survive COVID-19 there is going to be a new political reality – a reality well suited for populist radical right parties such as AFD, UKIP, Danish Peoples Party, Sweden Democrats and many more. Because when the world is in trouble, populist radical right parties will always claim to have the solution.

At its core, what COVID-19 has revealed to the Western world is that we are a global community. We must understand that in some respects there is no such thing as West and East, North and South or us versus them but rather there is only we – the global community.

Populists will put a different spin on the sad tale that is COVID-19. Instead, I can confidently

predict that populists will argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is either (1) an epic failure of the global community, (2) highlighting how ruling parties have failed to adequately respond to the crisis, and (3) of course, blame immigrants and multiculturalism.

## **"When the world is in trouble, populist radical right parties will always claim to have the solution"**

I will address each of the three points. But first, let me provide a short overview of the essential nature of populist radical right parties in Western Europe. I believe, similarly to Jens Rydgren who is a noted researcher on the subject, that populist radical right parties attempt to appeal to the discontented populace by exploiting the current structural conditions of the political environment to become electorally successful. Such structural conditions can be the post-industrial economy, economic crisis, unemployment, widespread political discontent,

the emergence of green parties, the dissolution of established identities, fragmentation of culture, globalisation and multiculturalism. Based on this definition and my understanding of populist radical right parties, they seem primed to be able to capitalise on the current political climate.

So, how will populist radical right parties in Western Europe use COVID-19 to further their own political agenda? One plausible scenario is that populist radical right parties will cry out, emphasise, and use the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of the epic failure of a global community. Why is this important? Given the nationalistic agenda of populist radical right parties they will most likely see the global spread of this disease as an opportunity to showcase that what is known is safe – and in this case, safety can be defined as a homogenous ethnic and racial community.

Despite clear and irrefutable proof that COVID-19 is racially and ethnically blind, I anticipate that populist radical right parties will nonetheless use this as an argument to continue fuelling the already pre-existing fear many

have of the unknown – COVID-19 may therefore be exactly the final nail in the coffin for the liberal worldview – and the final impetus for voting driven fundamentally by fear.

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Secondly, irrespective of the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, I anticipate that populist radical right parties will use this crisis as an opportunity to highlight the failures of established mainstream parties. Populist radical right parties see themselves and their very existence as being the voice of those unheard and those discontented with mainstream parties and their inability to bring

about change. When unemployment rises, when business fails, when people's lives are negatively affected, populist radical right parties are there to give voice to the struggling and dispossessed. Indeed, to usurp their voices for the parties' own ends. COVID-19 will be no different.

Thirdly, it is not unreasonable to imagine that when unemployment rises, when hospitals are over-populated and when there is the potential for another economic recession just around the corner – people will, once again, blame immigration and immigrants. Immigrants are rarely the true cause of people's anger, but rather a symptom. Immigrants will often look different to the indigenous population and they may speak a

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different language – this makes them an easy target for misplaced anger. But, in reality, the anger is not with immigrants but with the unknown – and in times of uncertainty many define the unknown in terms of ethnic and racial homogeneity.

The cure for fear and the unknown is not xenophobia or populist radical right parties but rather solidarity, empathy and a willingness to work together. But, the reality of the situation is that many will not reflect rationally. Instead, they will act based on fear and emotion; unsurprisingly these are the key ingredients for a second wave of populist radical right parties.

For many, emotions are much stronger predictor for how they vote than facts. And in the post COVID-19 world, emotions and not facts will once again be the name of the game.

### **About the author(s)**

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