

FOREWORD

The Populist Radical Right in Europe: Navigating its Rise and Consolidation

In contemporary political science literature, few topics warrant as urgent and detailed an examination as the rise of the Populist Radical Right (PRR) in Europe. The increasing influence of PRR parties across the continent signals significant shifts in the political landscape (Rooduijn 2015), necessitating a deeper investigation of their ideologies, tactics, and implications. This special issue of the Journal is dedicated to exploring ‘The Rise and Future of the Populist Radical Right in Europe’, a theme that reflects the immediacy of this challenge to European democratic values and practices.

The relevance of this theme stems from the PRR’s impact on national and European politics. Over recent years, Europe has witnessed a steady increase in electoral support for parties that espouse nativism, authoritarianism, and Euroscepticism (Dunn 2015). These parties promote a radical restructuring of societal norms and political institutions (Mudde 2014), aiming to reverse what they perceive as the erosion of national sovereignty and identity through globalisation and multicultural policies. Their rise is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader trend of political polarisation and the fragmentation of the traditional political centre.

The PRR’s growth is catalysed by various socio-economic factors, including economic instability, migration crises, and a perceived detachment between the electorate and the traditional political elites (Backlund and Jungar 2019; Kutiyanski, Krouwel, and Prooijen 2021; Mudde 2013; Muis and Immerzeel 2017; Pirro 2014). Such conditions have fostered feelings of disenfranchisement and betrayal among significant segments of the population, who turn to PRR parties that promise to restore control and prioritise national interests (Schulte-Cloos and Leininger 2022). These movements do not merely seek to influence policy but aim to redefine the political discourse around sovereignty, identity, and governance.

The strategies and successes of PRR parties employ populist rhetoric to frame themselves as the true representatives of the people, juxtaposing their vision against what they critique as corrupt and aloof elites (Mudde 2013). The rise of these political constellations has reopened the debate about what ‘populism’ is. Currently, populism is an umbrella term accommodating a variety of meanings, from the articulation of political demands resonating with the majority of people, usually utilised by the centrist political parties to describe both the left and the right, to the distortion/misrepresentation of a party’s political views in order to propagate with a piecemeal approach their positions to the wider public. It is in this conjuncture that we need to be more rigorous in how we use the term in order to avoid rendering it an empty signifier.

The term ‘radical’ is employed, in turn, in various ways. In the context of this issue, it denotes a fundamental divergence from established political norms and practices. It encapsulates the critical stance

of PRR on immigration and its often nativist, xenophobic platform that seeks to protect and prioritise the interests of the native-born populace against perceived foreign influences (Backlund and Jungar 2019; Downes and Loveless 2018).

The radical element of these parties is evident in their approaches to societal integration and multiculturalism. They often propagate policies that reinforce divisions, stoke nationalistic sentiments, and promote a homogeneous cultural identity that excludes minorities and immigrants. This radicalism is also apparent in their economic policies, which may reject global trade norms and promote economic isolationism to protect national industries and jobs (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2021; Pirro and Kessel 2017; Zaslove 2008).

Moreover, the term ‘radical’ reflects the methods and rhetoric employed by these parties. They frequently adopt confrontational and provocative tactics, from the use of charged language that frames political debates in terms of existential threats to the staging of dramatic public demonstrations. These tactics are designed to disrupt the political status quo and galvanise public support for a return to an idealised, sovereign past that, in their narrative, is free from external influence and internal corruption (Steenvoorden and Hartevelde 2018).

It is crucial to clarify that ‘radical’ does not necessarily imply violent or unlawful actions. Rather, it refers to a deep-seated desire to overhaul the system, which can manifest through democratic processes like elections and referenda (Leininger and Meijers 2021; Zagórski and Santana 2021). At the same time, since the term ‘radical’ has been used for decades to describe political groups and parties of the left which seek radical social change towards more egalitarian societies, being identified as ‘radical’ is not self-explanatory of these political constellations. Instead, it is in the conjunction of all three elements of Populist, Radical, and Right that the term PRR emerges as analytically useful.

The articles in this issue comprehensively explore these themes, each focusing on different facets of the PRR phenomenon. Through empirical studies, theoretical analyses, and case studies, they offer insights into the ideological underpinnings, electoral strategies, and policy impacts of PRR parties, improving our understanding of their ascent and consolidation in European politics. As we explore these discussions further, we aim to foster a scholarly debate that enhances academic understanding and informs policy-making and public discourse. This special issue brings together a series of scholarly articles that provide a diverse yet interconnected examination of the PRR across Europe. Each contribution deepens our understanding of individual national contexts and provides insight into the broader discourse on how these movements are shaping European politics. By presenting these articles and fostering a dialogue between them, we aim to illuminate the PRR’s multifaceted nature and draw conclusions on its implications for the future of democracy in Europe.

The articles compiled in this academic journal collectively shed light on various aspects of the populist

radical right (PRR) across Europe, offering nuanced insights into its emergence, strategies, and impact. In their insightful piece “Liberating the Bulgarian Political Environment: ‘We Continue the Change’ and the Populism of Democracy in Bulgaria” Atanasova and Gabdulhakov explore the socio-economic drivers behind Bulgaria’s PRR rise, emphasizing leaders' exploitation of public discontent. Philippou, with her extremely topical analysis in ‘The Rise of Far-Right Populism in Cyprus: The Case of ELAM’, sheds light on local strategies and narratives in Cyprus, showcasing how economic grievances and nationalistic sentiment bolster PRR movements like ELAM. Meanwhile, Ioannidis’ ‘Regional Influences on Europe’s Populist Radical Right: Social Benefits, Immigration, and Climate Change Policy Perceptions’ offers a comprehensive study on how regional factors such as economic conditions, immigration sentiments, and climate change perceptions interact to influence electoral outcomes for PRR parties across Europe, underscoring the multifaceted nature of PRR success. Sliding back to another case study, Sawyer dissects Éric Zemmour’s Reconquête party, illustrating its transformative effect on French politics through media-savvy tactics and controversial proposals in ‘Zemmour, Reconquête! and the Evolution of the French Far Right in the 2022 Elections’. Lastly, Quadrelli’s ‘The Darkside of Civil Society and its Relation with the Populist Radical Right: A Critical Discussion’ challenges assumptions about civil society's progressive role, examining how it can both fuel and constrain PRR movements in Germany and Italy.

Reading these excellent articles in dialogue with each other reveals several overarching themes. First, the adaptability of PRR movements is evident as they tailor their strategies to local conditions and prevailing sentiments, whether exploiting economic malaise in Bulgaria or tapping into historical grievances in Cyprus. Despite varied contexts, commonalities in their approaches include the use of populist rhetoric to frame themselves as defenders of the ‘true’ nationals against both domestic elites and foreign influences. Secondly, the articles collectively highlight the significant role of media and public discourse in the rise of the PRR. From Zemmour’s use of media in France to the manipulation of social networks in Germany and Italy, the strategic use of communication tools is pivotal. The results of these studies converge on a critical insight: the rise of the PRR is not merely a series of isolated incidents but a coherent movement across Europe driven by deep-seated social, economic, and political discontent. The PRR has been effective in gaining electoral success and shifting the political discourse towards more nativist, authoritarian, and Eurosceptic positions. This collective outcome emphasises a critical challenge for European democracies: addressing the root causes of discontent that fuel these movements while reinforcing democratic norms and protecting pluralistic values.

In summary, this special issue provides a comprehensive analysis of the PRR, offering critical insights into its strategies, influences, and impacts across Europe. After a decade of developments and changes, PRR party research has reached a level of maturity. The product of this maturation of this area of research is this special issue, which delivers a richer overview of the consolidation of the PRR.

Andreas Piperides, PhD Candidate in International Law and Legal Theory at the University of Glasgow

Nikandros Ioannidis, PhD Candidate in Political Social Sciences at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra

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