

# **Not So Right After All? Making Sense of the Progressive Rhetoric of Europe's Far-Right Parties**

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## **Abstract**

Several newly successful far-right European populist parties have deviated from traditional conservative stances by embracing progressive values such as gender equality, gay rights, religious freedoms, and the provision of generous social services. What rhetorical logic have they put forth when advancing their counterintuitive ideological mix? Scholarship on this question is still in its early phases and does not extend across countries and multiple parties. This paper turns to the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the National Rally in France, and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden for an assessment. The parties have emphasized that being of the nation or, more generally, Western civilization is of paramount importance. Given this, other personal characteristics are either seen as secondary and ultimately irrelevant for one's standing in the eyes of the party, or, conversely, as something that recent social progress has moved to protect and is therefore deserving of further safekeeping. These assertions are made directly in reference to immigrants – especially Muslim: their backward beliefs threaten these principles. Deeper ethno-nationalistic and civic-nationalistic thrusts therefore drive the logic. The rhetoric comes with subtle variations. In the conclusion, we reflect on the factors that might explain those variations.

## **Keywords**

European politics, far-right parties, progressivism, rhetorical logic, ethno- and civic-nationalism

## **Introduction**

Far-right populist parties (FRPP) in Europe have enjoyed remarkable successes in recent years. Experts describe them as the 'fastest-growing party family in Europe' (Golder, 2016: 477). Running on primarily anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and nativist platforms, they have secured gains in general elections in several countries. Major advances were achieved in 2017 alone. In Austria, the Freedom Party came a close third and found itself invited into government. Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom came second in the Dutch general elections, only 12 years after its founding. The Alternative for Germany became

the first far-right party to win seats in the Bundestag since the end of World War II. And, in France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly National Front until the summer of 2018) sent jitters throughout Europe when, for the first time since 2002, it reached the final run-offs for the presidency, where it was eventually defeated by Emmanuel Macron's Forward!

Results from a few years prior have also been impressive. The Finns Party, for instance, became the second largest parliamentary presence in 2015. Greece's Golden Dawn came third in 2015, just like the Movement for a Better Hungary in 2014. The Danish People's Party, in turn, came second in Denmark's 2015 general elections. FRPP have also been in recent or current coalition governments in many countries, from Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia to the Netherlands, Italy, and Switzerland. They have also been part of minority governments in Bulgaria, Denmark, and Norway (Golder, 2016: 478). Not all of these outcomes, of course, have translated into permanent successes. The Finns Party, for instance, experienced a dropped in popularity after 2015. Yet, the overall trend has been one of increased national relevance.

The successes of FRPP have extended to the European Union (EU) level, where the Danish People's Party, the United Kingdom's UKIP, and France's National Rally scored unprecedented victories at the 2014 European Parliament elections (Brack, 2015) – leading to various forms of cooperation in the name of nativism, even as some, like UKIP, later struggled domestically. In parallel, impressive gains have also been made locally. The National Rally, for instance, won in six of France's 13 regions in 2015, while the Alternative for Germany won in three key state elections in 2016, prompting commentators to speak of 'stunning gains' (Mortimer, 2016a).

How are we to explain such considerable successes? Media commentators (Aisch et al., 2017; *Der Spiegel*, 2010; *New York Times* 2016; Lebor, 2016) point to increasing distress among national electorates about their financial futures, the EU's reach, excessive immigration, and loss of national identity. The votes for Brexit and Donald Trump in 2016 offered further proof of such distress (Givens, 2017). These are promising initial arguments that require, however, further investigation.

Academics have by now articulated more robust arguments (Carter, 2005; Lubbers and Coenders, 2017; Mieriņa and Koroļeva, 2015; Cochrane and Nevitte, 2014;

Stockemer, 2017). In a useful literature overview, Godler (2016) categorizes those accounts as either ‘supply-side’ or ‘demand-side’ – following earlier analyses by Halikiopoulou et al. (2013), Kitschelt (1995), Norris (2005), and van der Brug et al. (2005). Among the supply-side accounts are those emphasizing the popular appeal of pro-market but socially authoritative platforms, strong party organizations, and openings in the political opportunity structure occasioned by traditional political parties losing legitimacy, the EU’s functional weaknesses (Senniger and Wagner, 2015), and corruption among political elites (Petsinis, 2015).

Among the demand-side are those arguing that cultural, economic, and other kinds of grievances held by certain segments of the population have increased the appeal of alternative parties. Thus, for instance, anti-immigration positions (Yilmaz, 2012) have resonated well when certain demographic, cultural, and economic conditions are present (Cochrane and Nevitte 2014). Emphasis on social entitlements (Nordensvard and Ketola 2014) has also proven useful.<sup>1</sup>

Both mainstream and academic accounts have proven valuable. Yet they have shared one assumption: that FRPP have fundamentally conservative outlooks (Ennser, 2012). This is consistent with the established literature. Mudde, for instance, distinguishes FRPP from their left-wing populist counterparts by stressing how the latter embrace equality, progressivism, and welfare programs (Mudde, 2007: 30). Similarly, when considering parties such as the Alternative for Germany, Freedom Party in Austria, and Northern League in Italy, Jungar and Jupskås (2014: 218) note their shared commitment to ‘traditional family values, and scepticism towards gender equality and gay rights’. Carter (2005: 17), in turn, after delving deeply into the literature concludes that ‘extreme right’ parties in Western Europe center on a rejection of democratic principles and norms, and of the idea of fundamental human equality.

Indeed, in an assessment of these parties, Golder (2016: 479) concludes that despite some variation in economic policies, what FRPP in Europe ‘have in common is a desire to create an authoritarian system that is strictly ordered according to the “natural”

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<sup>1</sup> Research on FRPP has of course covered topics beyond the causes of their success. These include media reactions to the parties’ electoral gains (see, for instance, Hellström and Hervik (2014) and Bos and Brants (2014) for analyses of Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands) and the populist responses of mainstream parties (Meijers, 2017).

differences that exist in society, as well as a law-and-order system that severely punishes deviant behavior’. In this spirit, scholars such as Kinnvall (2016: 524) argue that ‘much far right discourse [in Europe] is focused on the gendering of spaces, which is a process through which social systems maintain the organization of powerful hierarchies based on assumptions about masculinity, femininity, and privileges’.

Such a characterization of FRPP as fundamentally conservative, however, may not be entirely accurate, and might preclude a fuller understanding of the reasons for their advances. A growing alternative scholarship has accordingly responded by arguing that while FRPP were launched with conservative outlooks some have increasingly combined their xenophobic rhetoric with – at least *prima facie* – progressive rhetoric toward a number of issues, including gender equality and gay rights (see, for instance, Akkerman, 2015; De Koster et al., 2014; Dudink 2017; Mayer, 2015; and Spierings et al., 2015). This, the reasoning goes, can help explain how the parties have secured support from women, gay, lesbians, people of different religious orientations, other minorities, and those who side with them.

Accordingly, although exact figures are hard to obtain, and some question whether minorities’ votes for right-wing political parties can be causally linked to their progressive stances, some estimates are available. In France, for example, the consensus is that the ‘gay vote for the National Front has leapt in recent years’ (Chrisafis, 2017), with analysts putting the gay support above 35% in 2017 (Murdock, 2017). For Scandinavian countries, in turn, evidence suggests that those holding nativist views but who also support gays and lesbians have voted for these parties (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015). In addition, gays and women have directly strengthened FRPP by taking on organizational leadership positions (Sengupta, 2017; Wodak, 2017: 152).

Moreover, the turn to progressive causes has helped FRPP by weakening, ideologically, the traditionally powerful parties. When what is ‘right’ is no longer such, what is ‘left’ is unclear, and even the ‘center’ is called into question, voters can be persuaded to join new political forces. Left-leaning parties have thus struggled for legitimacy: if some of their right-wing competitors are also pro-LGBTQ and for gender equality, what is their distinctive identity? In the meanwhile, some centrist parties have attempted to the move to the right, with limited success, to capture or retain disillusioned

voters (Meijers, 2017). FRPP have certainly become a new ‘party family’ (Mair and Mudde, 1998) that has shaken conventional political landscapes.

If this alternative perspective is correct, one question requires further attention: how have FRPP managed in the first place to include progressive values in their stances? More specifically, what has been their rhetorical logic or, as Schmidt (2008) would have it, their ‘communicative discourse’? In this paper, we are interested in identifying the key conceptual elements that FRPP use to combine seemingly conflicting principles in their positions.

Existing research offers limited insights. Works typically consider only single issues, such as gender (see, for instance, Akkerman, 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015; and Siegel, 2017), or one political party or country (see, for instance, Murdock, 2017 and De Lange and Mügge 2015). The few multi-issue and multi-party analyses amount, in turn, to initial forays into this development with limited conceptual and empirical support (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013: 107; Brubaker 2017), or to brief journalistic reports (Sengupta, 2017; (Polakow-Suransky, 2016). Our aim is to adopt a broader perspective in terms of both issues and parties.

We accordingly consider four traditionally important progressives issues: gender equality, gay rights, religious freedoms, and the provision of generous social services. We deem these values to be progressive in so far as they aim for the elimination of various forms of inequalities and discrimination.<sup>2</sup> For our cases, we turn to the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, or PVV) in the Netherlands, the National Rally in France (*Rassemblement National*, or RN) in France, and the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, or SD) in Sweden.

We followed the principle of purposive heterogeneous variation for our selection: to broaden our findings’ relevance, we turned to parties operating in different national contexts in terms of political economies, general political orientations, and histories of immigration. France in this regard is a large, statist, continental market economy with a history of immigration heavily shaped by its post-colonial ties. The Netherlands is a midsize, increasingly economically neoliberal and otherwise socially liberal country that

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<sup>2</sup> We recognize that the provision of generous social service has at times been part of some right-wing agendas as well. However, it has also been a central element of progressive platforms, especially when conceptually linked to other traditionally left-wing goals.

has experienced different waves of immigration over the decades (guest workers from Morocco and Turkey in the 1960s, for instance, and war refugees from the 1990s on). Sweden is by contrast a small country with a social democratic market economy, a political system heavily shaped by socially liberal policies, and until recently a highly homogenous society. At the same time, we were also interested in intrinsically important cases (Odell, 2004): parties that have been vocal, successful, and influential. The PVV, RN, and SD meet all these criteria.

Our evidence comes from an examination of statements by key party members (made via social media, interviews, or public meetings and then reported by journalists or available on video on the internet), party platforms (available online), promotional materials (videos, leaflets, etc., as available online at party websites or other venues), and party initiatives (such as public marches, covered by mainstream media and other venues) undertaken in support of gender equality, gay rights, religious freedom, and the provision of social services. Using Lexis-Nexis Academic, we also conducted searches of major news sources with a variety of keywords.

The objective was not to generate a random sample of materials and statements, or to gather representative evidence for all party members' stances. Rather, it was to identify statements that are especially useful for uncovering the rhetorical logic, or 'communicative discourse', associated with the turn to progressive values: How have progressive values been tied to far-right and exclusionary agendas? We present below the most revealing passages. Given the recent successes of these parties, our time frame was roughly from 2000 onward. Throughout, when helpful, we made use of secondary academic research.

Our analysis suggests that the PVV, RN, and SD counter in similar fashion their intolerant rejection of 'others' coming from outside the country – as threatening, demanding, or otherwise negative – by articulating an open and inclusive mindset on the domestic front. This is accomplished by asserting that being of the nation or, more broadly, Western civilization is paramount. Other personal characteristics are seen as secondary and ultimately irrelevant for one's standing in the party's eyes, or, conversely, as something that recent social progress has moved to protect and therefore deserves

further safekeeping given the backward ideologies of immigrants. After all, the protection of *all* citizens from negative outside forces is the primary goal.

It follows that party leaders ‘welcome’ individuals with all different personal qualities and inclinations, and treat them as equal, provided that they are of the nation or Western civilization. Such tolerance translates into the articulation of specific standpoints relative to women, LGBTQs, people of various religious orientations, and those in need of economic support. They all merit respect and should be defended from unfair treatment and abuse. Thus, for the PVV, the language has often been about *Western civilizational tolerance* as it concerns gays, gender equality, and Christians and Jews – all supposedly under attack by intolerant Islam. For the RN, a key point has been the defense of *French ideas of liberty* against radical Islam especially in relation to gays and religion. And for the SD, the focus has turned to *community, and with it inclusion, as a Swedish value* as it concerns its generous welfare system, LGBTQs, and gender equality, and in reaction to the repressive cultures and demands of Middle Eastern and other immigrants.

Thus, more fundamentally, we may say that variants of ethno-nationalistic and civic-nationalistic perspectives underlie the purported interest in progressive values. Ethno-nationalism seeks to safeguard the cultural, traditional, and policy identities of a country from ‘threats’ that others, coming from different value-systems, pose. The mindset is one of ‘cultural protection’: fears of ‘extinction’ motivate it (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2018: 5; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2015). ‘Others’ need to be kept away since they are fundamentally incompatible with domestic values (Rydgren 2007). Much the same can be said of civic-nationalism, though with more emphasis on adherence to political values of participation in society. In so far as progressive principles are seen as part of those values, they too must be protected.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that such rhetoric has translated directly into concrete party actions or policies, or that all party members have embraced it. Moreover, we recognize that while it might reflect genuine beliefs it is also unquestionably strategic and opportunistic (Wodak, 2015: 42). The observable language should not be taken at face value. With those caveats in mind, our point is that a significant rhetorical trend has nonetheless happened across parties and issues, and that this merits analysis.

In the conclusion we summarize the findings and reflect on the kind of factors that might influence a party's specific rhetorical mix. These include cognitive, institutionalist, and historical variables.

### **The PVV: Defending Western Civilization**

The PVV was founded by Geert Wilders in 2006 shortly after he left the liberal-conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy over disagreements on many issues, including Turkey's accession into the EU. Wilders' core position has been unequivocal: *the* problem facing the Netherlands is Islamic intolerance. The West is by contrast tolerant. This is a *civilizational* conflict. As Wilders put it in 2009 in a speech in Los Angeles:

Islam wants to dictate every aspect of life and society and prohibits individual, political and religious rights and freedoms. Islam is not compatible with our Western civilization or democracy, nor will it ever be, because Islam doesn't want to coexist, it wants to submit and set the entire agenda ... it is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between rationality and barbarity.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, as Wilders explained to *Euronews* in 2017, Islam 'might be dressed up as a religion ... but in reality, it is not so much a religion but an ideology'. And that ideology is profoundly closed to other perspectives: 'if you look at anti-Semitism, the Koran has more anti-Semitism in it than Mein Kampf, the book of another totalitarian violent ideology' (*Euronews*, 2017). Hence, 'if we go on like this', he warned his Los Angeles audience, 'we are heading for the end of European civilization'.

The civilizational framing – at heart civic-nationalist in character – has allowed Wilders to link his extreme anti-Islamic ideas – which include deportations, the surrender of dual citizenships, banning the Koran, and mosque closures (Mortimer, 2016b) – to the need to protect a number of minorities. Gays and women have typically been at the top of

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<sup>3</sup> Accessed November 22, 2017 at: <https://pvv.nl/index.php/component/content/article.html?id=1878:speech-geert-wilders-in-los-angeles>



the list. As Akkerman (2015: 39) writes, the PVV ‘has been notable for its defence of women’s equality and same-sex partnerships’.

Examples abound. Wilders’ speech in Germany in January 2017 at the Europe of Nations and Freedom Conference (a European Parliament’s nationalist group) offers a good illustration:

Politicians from almost all established parties are promoting our Islamization. Almost the entire establishment, the elite universities, the churches, the media, politicians, put our hard-earned liberties at risk. Day after day, for years, we are experiencing the decay of our cherished values. The equality of men and women, freedom of opinion and speech, tolerance of homosexuality – all this is in retreat (Pieters, 2017).

The ‘cherished’ values of European culture include respect for others. Islam, by contrast, is barbaric. Thus, in June 2015 Wilders tweeted an image of a public execution in Mosul with this message: ‘ISIS thugs execute three gay men in Mosul, Iraq. #islamicbarbarism’.<sup>4</sup> A year later, following the attack on a gay Orlando club, Wilders told *BuzzFeed News* that ‘the freedom that gay people should have — to kiss each other, to marry, to have children — is exactly what Islam is fighting against’. He added ‘that we’ve imported so much Islam to the Western free countries’ (Feder et al., 2017). This includes Sharia law which, as he reminded his audience at his 2009 Los Angeles speech, ‘means the end of our hard won freedom, for Sharia law denies the equality of men and women’.

In this sort of rhetoric, concerns about protecting homosexuality and women are seamlessly combined with those about religious freedom – namely Christianity and Judaism. The fact that both religions have historically opposed non-conforming sexual behavior and feminism presents no problem: they belong to the Western tradition and, as such, are tolerant and should be defended. Consider Wilders’ speech at the 2016 United States National Republican Convention event for LGBT Trump supporters. There, *Breitbart News* editor Milo Yiannopoulos introduced him as the ‘hope for Western

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<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/607158366729867264?lang=en>

civilization’ (Harkinson, 2016). Against the background of a wall of sexually explicit gay posters, Wilders berated Islam’s intolerance and accused Western leaders of cultural relativism: ‘the biggest disease in Europe today: politicians believing that Christianity, that Judaism, that humanism is worth as much as Islam, which of course it’s not the case’.<sup>5</sup> The audience, which on the available video appears to include only men, all presumably either gay or supportive of LGBTQs, responded by cheering. They apparently appreciated the hierarchical positioning of Christianity and Judaism – that is, Western civilization – vis-à-vis Islam.

Other PVV officials have echoed Wilders’ words. Parliamentarian Fleur Agema asserted, for instance, in 2009 when debating the ‘problem’ of criminal Moroccan youth that ‘antisemitism and homophobia are not Dutch phenomena. They are imported to a depressingly great extent from Morocco’ (Gans, 2010: 81). As to women, Wilders (2016) wrote on *Breitbart* that Islam ‘aims to establish a worldwide Islamic state and bring everyone, including “infidels,” such as Christians, Jews, atheists, and others, under Sharia law. This is the barbaric Islamic law which deprives non-Muslims of all rights, treats women as inferior beings, condemns apostates and critics of Islam to death, and condones terror’.

We note that the PVV has also taken a progressive stance toward social security, although this is perhaps less of a recurring theme. Its 2017-2021 elections program called for the abolition of health care deductibles, lowering housing fees, keeping the retirement age at 65, and rolling back cuts. This was under the slogan ‘The Netherlands Ours Again!’ and, as the number one priority, the ‘de-Islamification of the Netherlands’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, not everyone is to benefit from the generous changes. As Wilders stated in Berlin in early September 2011, ‘those who lower their chances of employment by the way they dress, will see their access to welfare payments diminished’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, those who will wear a burqa will be deprived of all their benefits.

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<sup>5</sup> See the video of the speech (minute 1:50 on) at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GJC17c2sfk>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.geertwilders.nl/94-english/2007-preliminary-election-program-pvv-2017-2021>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.geertwilders.nl/in-de-media-mainmenu-74/nieuws-mainmenu-114/87-english/news/1764-speech-geert-wilders-in-berlin-3-september-2011-english-version>

### **The RN: Protecting French Liberties**

For much of its existence, the RN has held extreme-right views on essentially all issues – from the economy to the Holocaust to social matters. Jean-Marie Le Pen, its founder and leader until his ousting in 2015 by his daughter Marine Le Pen, for instance once called homosexuality a ‘biological and social anomaly’ and stated that ‘there are no queens in the National Front’ (Murdock, 2017). The party advocated well into the 1990s a view of women as ‘mothers of the nation’ with important roles in traditional family life (Scrinzi, 2017).

Marine Le Pen has maintained the RN’s unequivocal antagonism toward outside forces. The EU and globalization are two. But perhaps the most salient is immigration, and especially radical Islam. For the RN, the problem is how immigrants challenge the French Republic’s values. ‘There are two Islams’, Le Pen recently told a group of foreign journalists: ‘One is a religion that is perfectly compatible with French values, and practicing Muslims, like Christians and Jews, have never posed a problem. But there is another political, fundamentalist, totalitarian Islam that wants Sharia law over French law’ (Llana, 2017). The RN therefore wants to *save France and its values* from radical Islam. The party feels uniquely positioned to do this. As she stated during the 2017 presidential run-offs against Macron, like other politicians Macron ‘doesn’t see a nation, but land, he doesn’t see a people, but a population. We have the obligation to warn the French’ (Viscusi, 2017).

This anti-foreign, essentially civic-nationalist, perspective has led the RN to adopt progressive language that at times is nothing short of remarkable, especially considering its past. The starting point entails recognizing that the French Republic is the basis of French society, and that ‘liberty’ appears in its 1958 Constitution as its first foundational value. The RN is therefore ready to defend, against foreign oppressors, liberty as it applies to *all* French citizens regardless of personal preferences and inclinations. Defending liberty means defending France itself. What French citizens actually do with their liberties is secondary, provided of course that they do not undermine France. Given this, some of the RN’s clearest assertions have concerned LGBTQs and religious freedom.

Consider, for instance Le Pen's campaign speech in December of 2010. In a 'number of territories', she observed, Muslim headscarves and public prayer are so common that people feel 'subject to religious laws that replace the laws of the Republic'. The result, she continued, is that 'I hear more and more testimonies about the fact that in certain districts, it is not good to be a woman, homosexual, Jewish' or anything else (Feder and Buet, 2017). The French Republic guarantees freedom, and this is under attack. Being gay is often mentioned. As Sébastien Chenu, a prominent gay activist and RN representative in the National Assembly as of June 2017, put it, the 'French people feel threatened; I believe that about gay people as well'. He worries about France become 'less free', and 'when society becomes less free, when one is gay, one has very much to lose' (Feder and Buet, 2017). Things should be different. As Le Pen said in 2011, 'whether man or woman, heterosexual or homosexual, Christian, Jewish or Muslim, we are foremost French'.<sup>8</sup> And since being French means being free, homosexuals, amongst others, should be able to live as they want.

Several prominent RN members have accordingly expressed, admittedly not without some controversy within the party, pride for being gay. Inconceivable a decade earlier, in 2017 the RN had, according to some sources, more high-ranking gay figures than any other major party in France, including the Socialists (Feder and Buet, 2017). Le Pen's right hand man, Florian Philippot, is gay and was Vice President for the Party from 2012 to 2017. Thus, as Chenu, along with others, stressed in 2015 'the National Front is the only party' in France 'whose leader is a woman and its deputy leader is gay' (Halliburton, 2015). It is worth noting here that Chenu himself joined the RN by leaving the far-right Union for a Popular Movement because of Le Pen's 'consistent views on Europe and social issues'.<sup>9</sup>

Such rhetoric, it must be underlined, does not amount to a recognition of the intrinsic merits of being gay. What matters is the freedom to be gay. As such, RN leaders consistently express disinterest in a person's sexual orientation. Philippot for example once addressed media criticism of the RN as homophobic by stating that 'we're a party

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/20141213-france-far-right-national-front-flirting-gay-vote-chenu-philippot> (accessed 19 December 2017).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/20141213-france-far-right-national-front-flirting-gay-vote-chenu-philippot> (Accessed 19 December 2017).

that *doesn't care about people's preferences*, their sexual practices or whatever ... You're a French citizen foremost. And the National Front is a very young party: the members, the voters, the candidates are young. This is a modern party' (Chrisafis, 2017, italics added).

The need to affirm French values extends to all things, including religion. One's religious preferences are unimportant. Hence, in response to critics who have accused her of targeting Muslims, Le Pen has repeatedly asserted that '*I'm not interested in knowing what religion someone belongs to. I defend the French people whoever they are, wherever they come from, whatever their origins, whatever their religion. I don't have a sectarian vision of French society. The only community that exists is the national community*' (italics added).<sup>10</sup> Le Pen has therefore often expressed support for Christians but also for France's Jewish community (and even moderate Muslims) – in so far as all are under threats from radical Islam. In a June 2014 interview, she for instance stated that 'I do not stop repeating it to French Jews ... not only is the National Front not your enemy, but it is without a doubt the best shield to protect you. It stands at your side for the defense of our freedoms of thought and of religion against the only real enemy, Islamist fundamentalism' (Katz, 2017).

Here again the point is France's protection. As Le Pen put it in 2014 during an interview, 'I recognize only one community: the national one. That's the Constitution! It means the Republic can't ground its action on local community criteria'. France stands as one, and 'to give a representation would mean that there is conflictual interests inside of the French population and that is not acceptable' (Wietzmann, 2014).

### **The SD: Safeguarding the Community**

Though not in government and shunned by all other major parties, in 2014 and 2018 the SD came third in Sweden's general elections. In 2017 a Reuters poll suggested it had become the second biggest party (Sharman, 2017). Its popularity dropped later that year, however, due to the government's own adoption of stricter anti-immigration policies (Sennero, 2017). The SD is unquestionably viewed as a far-right party, with historical

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<sup>10</sup> BBC interview with Le Pen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzn5CoEWWII> (minute 18)

roots in neo-Nazi ideology, both because of its stances and the older political ties of some leading members (Towns et al., 2014).

Yet, as with the PVV and RN, the SD's orientation has not prevented it from advocating support for LGBTQ rights, gender equality, and a well-funded welfare state. In the SD's case, the anchoring has been Sweden's traditional commitment to community and social inclusion. Everyone, the logic goes, should feel welcome and looked-after in Sweden: discrimination and exclusion are unacceptable. Belonging, however, means respect for certain principles intrinsically related to inclusivity: equality, honesty, and a willingness to contribute to the whole. Those with different mindsets are, according to this essentially ethno-nationalistic perspective, not welcome.

Major statements have concerned welfare programs (Nordensvard and Ketola, 2015). In a 2016 party video, for instance, we hear Jimmie Åkesson, the party's leader, while images of assorted scarved and otherwise clearly middle-eastern immigrants appear:

Our country is in a grave state and our society is falling apart. Vital welfare functions, such as elderly care, schooling, health care, social services, [the] police, [the] judiciary, and more, are in severe hardship ... [we have become] a society that has lost its optimism, feeling of homeliness and its trust ... we must have the courage to be open and honest ... it will take a long time to recreate the security, the feeling of homeliness ... that once made Sweden one of the best countries in the world to live in.

'The conflict', he continues, 'is really not about skin colour, gender, sexual, orientation or about class. Neither is the conflict between those born in this country and those who are not'. The truth, he asserts as we see young people smashing cars and others reaching for drugs or free handouts, is that

The real conflict is between the constructive and the destructive. Between those are ready to make an effort and contribute to our country – and those who are not. Between those who build cars and those who burn cars. Between those who

fill our children with knowledge and self respect, and those who fill them with drugs and self pity.

Sweden's welfare programs can only last with the 'Swedification', or absorption, of those 'others' into the Swedish model. What is needed, Åkesson affirms, is 'a strengthened Swedish citizenship' that 'bridges these forced lines of conflict and gives us the sense of community needed to overcome' these challenges. 'It is in the citizenship that we find the public spirit. The respect for our heritage ... for previous generations, for those who built this country. That is how you, me and them – become an us'.

'Community', then, or participation in the collective 'us', is the answer:

Becoming a Swedish citizen is a welcoming into our community ... but it is also a social contract associated with duties and responsibilities. We will never welcome those who come here only ... to live at our expense ... but, at the same time we need to strengthen the way to our community for those whose honest ambition is to become a part of our society ... I have a dream of a strengthened public spirit ... a society characterized by trust, a sense of community and faith in the future.<sup>11</sup>

Various SD's materials affirm this logic of belonging and external rejection. Its platform at one point stated that 'the nationalism of the SD is open and non-racist. By defining the nation in terms of culture, language, identity, and loyalty, and not in terms of historical national belonging or genetic membership, our national community is open to people with a background in other nations ... a community of Swedes sharing certain core characteristics, values and behaviors' (Towns et al., 2014: 241). And during the 2010 national elections the SD ran an ad featuring an elderly woman struggling to get to a welfare desk only to be overtaken by women in burquas carrying babies. 'Politics is all about priorities', the voice stated, and 'the 19th of September you can choose if you want to save money from the pensions or immigration budgets ... the choice is yours'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tXeGGpD0Ac> (accessed 22 December 2017).

<sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pumIT31qqQQ> (accessed 22 December 2017).

The SD has extended its views on ‘community’, ‘trust’, and ‘belonging’, and those who oppose them, to LGBTQs and women. In 2015 it for instance sponsored an unofficial gay pride parade through a predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Stockholm. The point, the organizers thought, was to bring the language of ‘inclusion’ to parts of the city that ‘refuse’ to belong, and to highlight the disjointedness afflicting Swedish society. Expectedly, the ‘Pride Jarva’ parade attracted criticism by LGBT groups and anti-racist groups for stoking unrest in already volatile quarters. The official Stockholm Pride organization and the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights distanced themselves from the initiative and Jan Sjunnesson, the parade’s organizer, whom they described as actually being anti-gay. Sjunnesson’s response was predictable: ‘I am not homophobic as the media calls me ... I used to be bisexual, now I am married to an Indian woman, so I am not racist either. However, I am against the Islamisation of Sweden’ (Naib, 2010).

Regarding gender equality, the SD has certainly made conservative statements. In 2005, for instance, its platform asserted that ‘men and women are not created equal and can, therefore, in different contexts use different starting points and do different things in different ways’ (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014: 47). This has led the SD to promote heterosexual homes as ideal for raising children, and to advocate for more restrictions on abortion rights. Yet, at the same time, while ‘the party’s ideological core is suspicious of gender equality and its connection with feminism ... gender equality constructed as a Swedish national trait is often seen as a fundamental boundary between “us and them”’ (Ibid: 48). Put differently, in so far as Swedish culture prizes equality and inclusion, ‘gender equality is named as something “Swedish”’ and is set against the ‘other’, especially Muslim immigrants (Mulinari and Neergard, 2014: 48). Tellingly, the fear is often expressed in terms of ‘separation’ or ‘segregation’ – opposites of ‘community’ and ‘belonging’, as a 2009 opinion piece by Åkesson exemplifies:

That leading representatives of the Muslim community will demand the implementation of Sharia law (*Sharialagar*) in Sweden ... that Swedish swimming clubs would introduce separate timetables for women and men, that



Swedish municipalities would discuss the possibility of gender-segregated swimming education in schools (as cited in Mulinari and Neergard, 2014: 48).

Because of these fears, SD leaders have voiced their support for the UN Declaration of Human Rights and its gender equality clauses (Towns et al., 2014).

## **Discussion**

The PVV, NF, and SD have included progressive values in their otherwise xenophobic and extremist rhetorics. What might seem as an ideological contradiction is presented by leading figures in these parties as coherent and rational. With the primary goal of protecting the nation, its values, and Western civilization from repressive and destructive foreigners, all citizens are considered worthy of protection and part of the struggle. Progressivism is thus seamlessly folded into strands of ethno- and civic-nationalisms.

While the three parties have subscribed to this logic, subtle variations exist. The PVV highlights Islam's attacks on the tolerance of Western civilization. Gays, gender equality, and Christianity and Judaism must thus be protected against Muslim intransigence. The RN wishes to safeguard the French Republic's core values, especially liberty, especially against the threats of radical Islam. Its progressive language has applied to LGBTQs and religious liberties. And the SD, preoccupied with the fate of Sweden's commitments to community and social inclusion, has sought to protect a generous welfare system, LGBTQ rights, and gender equality – all of which it sees as under attack by excessive Muslim immigration. These were not comprehensive accounts of each party's position. They nonetheless point to the possibility of differences within a broader discursive approach.

As stated at the outset, we did not presume that vocalizing these stances is equivalent to a genuine commitment to them, or that they have gone uncontested within the parties. Indeed, many have criticized these parties for being opportunistic, disingenuous, and misleading.<sup>13</sup> Populist leaders can be crafty entrepreneurs of identities (Reicher and

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<sup>13</sup> In the case of the RN see, for instance, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20150328/gay-support-for-national-front-on-the-rise> (accessed on 18 December 2017) and <http://www.france24.com/en/20141213-france-far-right-national-front-flirting-gay-vote-chenu-philippot> (accessed 19 December 2017).

Hopkins 2001). Yet, to the extent that such a shift in ideology has helped FRPP succeed, it should be taken seriously and examined.

An important question that emerges from the analysis concerns variation: what might explain the specific rhetorical approaches of any one party? We can point to three types of factors, all related to national contexts. Future research should further investigate this question. First, as social movement scholars argue (Benford and Snow, 2000), any successful framing of an ideological stance must resonate with followers and audiences. This can only happen if it aligns, to some degree, with existing *cultural repertoires*. Regarding the Netherlands, for instance, scholars note that in ‘no other country have discourses of gay rights and sexual freedom played such a prominent role’ (Mepschen et al., 2010; Dudink 2017). The country also experienced a very rapid secularization process starting in the 1960s. With this in mind, the PVV’s turn to gay rights and freedom of religion is unsurprising: it is consistent with social currents.

A second likely factor is *institutional*. Literatures in comparative politics and sociology highlight the different institutional profiles of countries: complex systems of policies, structures, and rules that promote certain practices and outcomes (Campbell, 2004; Campbell and Hall, 2015). Welfare systems are an example. In countries with extensive welfare states it may be strategically tempting for any party to advance xenophobic agendas by arguing that others undermine the integrity of popular programs. The case of the SD in Sweden confirms this: its language ‘fits’ the broader institutional context.

A third factor relates to the foundational *social contracts* of nations. In some nations, constitutions or other founding documents are quite present in the collective imagination. There, xenophobic parties can garner voters’ support by warning about threats to those documents’ core principles. And if those principles include notions of liberty or equality, those parties will find it useful to elicit the support of those who put a premium on those notions. The language of the RN – with its promotion of French liberty and outreach to LGBTQ people and different religions faiths – is consistent with this logic.

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