



POLICY BRIEF

# Center-right strategies for addressing the rise of the European far right

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**If Western leaders seeking to preserve the liberal order dismiss growing public apprehension over immigration, they are likely to continue losing ground to far-right movements.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the West, apprehension over immigration and national identity are boosting the electoral fortunes of—and in some cases, bringing to power—political forces hostile to the liberal world order. Central to the growing popularity of these disparate political forces and phenomena is a growing belief that borders have become too porous, that nations are accepting too many immigrants (whether through legal or illegal channels), and that immigrants are not assimilating quickly and thoroughly enough into native cultures.

While the numbers of irregular migrants to Europe has declined significantly in the time since the 2015-16 refugee crisis, the lingering after-effects of the deluge—namely, the sense that European governments had lost control and a pessimism about European societies' ability to integrate so many newcomers—have had a profound effect on

the politics of the West. According to the spring 2018 Eurobarometer poll, Europeans list immigration and terrorism, increasingly intertwined in the minds of ordinary citizens given the threat of Islamist terrorism and the Islamic faith of the majority of the immigrants, as the two most important issues facing the EU.<sup>1</sup>

To ensure that these parties do not attain power and undermine both their own countries' democratic institutions as well as the international liberal order more broadly, it is necessary to reduce the political salience of immigration. If leaders who are genuinely committed to preserving the liberal order ignore or dismiss popular opinion on immigration, they will lose ground to far-right movements committed to neither.

## INTRODUCTION

Across the West, apprehension over immigration and national identity are boosting the electoral fortunes of—and in some cases, bringing to power—political forces hostile to the liberal world order. Though support for such forces goes back several decades, in some key countries it is reaching a more critical mass to attain power or block business as usual. In the United States, presidential candidate Donald Trump unexpectedly rode to victory by promising to deport millions of illegal immigrants and build a wall along the southern border. Trump's radical departure from traditional GOP foreign policy nostrums on trade, international alliances, and Russia—that is, his repudiation of key elements of the American-led liberal world order—has done little to dent enthusiasm among his supporters, who are willing to overlook or endorse his heresies because of his tough position on immigration.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, the 2016 decision by the British people to leave the European Union, Marine Le Pen doubling her father's vote share in the 2017 French presidential election, the entrance of the Alternative for Germany into the Bundestag and all 16 German state legislatures, and the formation of a populist coalition government in Italy between the far right Northern League and the Five Star Movement are all political expressions of deep frustration with political establishments. Central to the growing popularity of these disparate political forces and phenomena is a growing belief that borders have become too porous, that nations are accepting too many immigrants (whether through legal or illegal channels), and that immigrants are not assimilating quickly and thoroughly enough into native cultures. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has exploited the issue of immigration to earn an international profile far out of proportion to that usually afforded the leader of a small, Central European country of just 10 million people.

The purpose of this paper is not to weigh the merits or morality of liberal or restrictionist approaches to immigration. Immigration is ultimately a national

competency, a realm best left to individual governments in consultation with their citizenries. While one can oppose restrictive immigration policies on an economic or humanitarian basis, there is nothing inherently illiberal in reducing immigration levels.<sup>3</sup> The specific matter of asylum excepted, a liberal democracy does not have an obligation to open its doors to foreigners in the same way that it is obliged to protect the basic freedoms of its own citizens. What should concern all of us with a stake in upholding the liberal international order, however, is how opposition to mass immigration across the Western world is politically channeled.<sup>4</sup> This is because what all of the aforementioned populist political leaders and movements share, in addition to their anti-immigration fervor, is skepticism if not outright opposition to that order, as well as a positive disposition to its chief external threat: the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin.

## THE RISE OF THE EUROPEAN FAR RIGHT

The rise of right-wing populism, at least in Europe, is in large part attributable to the nearly 2 million migrants who entered the continent over the course of 2015-16, and the perceived inability of European governments and the European Union to handle the influx. And while the numbers of irregular migrants to Europe has declined significantly in the time since then, the lingering after-effects of the deluge—namely, the sense that European governments had lost control and a pessimism as to European societies' ability to integrate so many newcomers—have had a profound effect on the politics of the West. According to the spring 2018 Eurobarometer poll, Europeans list immigration and terrorism, increasingly intertwined in the minds of ordinary citizens given the threat of Islamist terrorism and the Islamic faith of the majority of the immigrants,<sup>5</sup> as the two most important issues facing the EU.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to immigration, European policy, on both the national and supranational levels, has for years been engaged in a game of catch-up with public opinion. In no case has this inability of the

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political class to meet the demands of the public had more momentous consequence than Brexit. Between 2000 and the vote for Brexit 16 years later, the percentage of British people who viewed immigration as a major problem increased from 7 percent to 48 percent, thereby rendering it the most important issue in the country, at least in the minds of voters.<sup>7</sup> Yet this growing concern was not reflected in the formation of public policy, thereby providing an opening for someone like Nigel Farage and his United Kingdom Independence Party to advocate for the wholesale departure of the U.K. from the EU. After the EU welcomed 10 new member states from Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, the British government of Tony Blair was one of only three EU nations that chose not to avail itself of temporary immigration controls it could have placed on citizens from those countries. This decision may have made economic sense at the time, but in retrospect, it was also decisive in pushing public opinion in the direction of leaving the EU. Seven years later, a YouGov poll would find that 67 percent of the British public believed that immigration over the previous decade had been “a bad thing for Britain.”<sup>8</sup> Cognizant of these worries, the Conservative-led coalition government of Prime Minister David Cameron promised to reduce immigration, but was either unwilling or unable to slow it down, to the point that immigration actually increased to a high of 330,000 people by 2015.<sup>9</sup> It was in this context of repeatedly thwarted expectations that the “Leave” campaign’s mantra of “take back control” was so effective.

It is not just Britain where public and elite opinion on immigration have been out of sync. A 2017 Chatham House survey found that, in eight out of 10 European countries, majorities oppose any further immigration from Muslim countries, the same exact position Donald Trump announced, to great controversy, during his successful presidential campaign.<sup>10</sup> Fifty-three percent of Germans, whose country was so widely lauded for its humanitarianism during the 2015 migrant crisis, agree with Trump on this question. Divergence

between public and elite opinion on immigration is a phenomenon noticeable across Europe, according to political scientists Markus Wagner and Thomas M. Meyer, as “voter positions are generally to the right of mainstream party consensus, so that shifts to the right on immigration and on law and order are in fact shifts towards the median voter.”<sup>11</sup> According to Chatham House, in no country polled did more than 32 percent disagree with a complete ban on Muslim immigration.

Such statistics are no doubt dispiriting to those who believe in the inherent virtue and workability of multiculturalism. But if preservation of the liberal international order is the foremost concern of policymakers, more important than the morality of public attitudes about Muslim immigration is how this undeniably widespread skepticism toward its purported benefits is handled by politicians. Voters, simply put, want and expect stricter immigration policies. In an electoral democracy, they will get them either from mainstream political leaders who support NATO, the EU, market economies, an alliance with the United States, and other elements of the liberal order, or from far-right demagogues who support none of these things. “It would be a major political mistake if liberals simply ignore or ridicule these fears,” writes Ivan Krastev of the anti-immigration sentiment rising across the West.<sup>12</sup> His is a sentiment echoed by European Council President Donald Tusk, whose native Poland is one of the European countries most hostile to immigration. Speaking of controversial efforts to partner with non-EU governments to limit immigration to Europe, Tusk put it bluntly: “If we don’t agree on them then you will see some really tough proposals from some really tough guys.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the best intentions of its proponents, mass immigration is having a destabilizing effect on European democracy by abetting populist parties hostile to both liberal democracy and the liberal world order. As these parties exploit the gap between public opinion and public policy, European political leaders are increasingly faced with a

dilemma: Should they sacrifice the stability of the liberal international order on the altar of a liberal immigration regime?

To save liberal democracy from its illiberal antagonists, they will need to decouple the highly charged subject of immigration from those metrics—respect for checks and balances, adherence to the rule of law, protection of minorities, pluralism, freedom of the press, support for democratic alliances, a values-based foreign policy, etc.—that truly determine whether a nation is a liberal democracy and a contributor to the liberal world order. Japan is one example of a nation that has a highly restrictive (one might even say xenophobic) immigration policy, but which is nonetheless a liberal democracy that plays a productive role in maintaining liberal order. It is my contention that, if leaders who are genuinely committed to preserving this order ignore or dismiss popular opinion on immigration, they will lose ground to far-right movements committed to neither.

## **THE CONTRASTING CASES OF SWEDEN AND DENMARK**

A compelling illustration of how *not* to handle the issue of immigration is Sweden, which touts itself as a “humanitarian superpower” and has accepted more migrants and refugees per capita than any nation in the world.<sup>14</sup> This intake reached its height during the migrant crisis of 2015-16, when the Scandinavian country accepted over 160,000 people, second only to Germany in terms of absolute numbers, and by far the highest number of migrants per capita.<sup>15</sup> Over the past five years, Sweden has taken in 600,000 people, an enormous number for a country of less than 10 million.

Yet in recent years, migrants have been disproportionately involved in certain types of high-profile crimes, namely sexual assault, gang violence, grenade attacks, and car bombings.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the unemployment gap between native Swedes and the foreign born is the second highest among members

of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), with immigrants three times as likely to be unemployed, a disparity due to the low educational achievement of most migrants and a lack of unskilled jobs in the highly advanced Swedish economy. “Sweden is statistically one of the worst countries at the integration of foreigners,” Aje Carlbom, a professor in social anthropology at Malmö University tells the *Financial Times*. “Why? Mainly because this is a highly complex country where you can’t get a job without education. Many of those who come are uneducated—that is the main problem.”<sup>17</sup>

Sweden’s approach to immigration and assimilation has been the subject of criticism among its neighbors. “I often use Sweden as a deterring example” of how not to deal with these issues, the former Danish Prime Minister and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in an interview on Swedish television.<sup>18</sup> Many Swedes would agree. In 2014, a year before the migrant crisis, 44 percent of Swedes supported cuts in the country’s generously high annual intake of immigrants.<sup>19</sup> Three years later, after the government was forced to announce the deportation of 80,000 people (a full half of the number it admitted during the brunt of the crisis), 48 percent of Swedes expressed agreement with the sentiment that “there are too many immigrants in our country” and 44 percent endorsed the statement that “Immigration is causing my country to change in ways that I don’t like.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite the problems presented by mass immigration and the large portion of the public wary of it, no mainstream political party in Sweden would broach the subject. This unfortunately (and predictably) left a massive vacuum to be filled by fringe actors. When it first entered parliament in 2010, the Sweden Democrats (SD) barely passed the electoral threshold with 5.7 percent of the vote. The party has its origins in the neo-Nazi movement, and while it has certainly moderated its message and expelled some of its more visibly extremist members over the years, it nonetheless opposes Swedish membership

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in the European Union and potential membership in NATO, and seeks better relations with Russia. In the most recent national election, the SD scored nearly 18 percent of the vote, its highest result ever, and enough to constitute the balance of power between the main center-left and center-right blocs. Due to the mainstream parties' refusal to form coalitions with the SD, however, Sweden went without a government for the longest time in its history as the mainstream parties haggled among themselves.

The rising popularity of the SD is a lamentable development that would likely have never occurred had Sweden's mainstream parties deigned to represent the views of nearly half their population on the crucial matter of immigration. (In France, as immigration has gained salience over the past 15 years, the proportion of French who see Marine Le Pen's National Rally as a threat to democracy has fallen from 70 percent in 2002 to 58 percent in 2017.<sup>21</sup>) Support for the SD and its anti-establishment message has coincided with the longest economic expansion in Sweden in four decades, a trend visible among populist candidates and parties across the world, and an indication that issues related to national identity and immigration transcend the vicissitudes of economic boom and bust.

Belatedly, the Swedish center-right is acknowledging its past failure to represent the sizeable portion of the public that wants to reduce immigration levels, and that condescending to voters by dismissing their concerns has only emboldened the far right. "When voters are discontent [sic], don't blame them," the recently elected leader of the center-right Moderate Party, Ulf Kristersson, says.<sup>22</sup> Over the past two decades, he avers, Swedish governments of both the right and left have pursued "very unsuccessful integration policies."<sup>23</sup> The Moderates' 2018 election manifesto called for a "strict migration policy" that reduces the number of people granted asylum, "faster integration" with a greater emphasis placed on language acquisition, and tying welfare benefits to employment.<sup>24</sup>

Neighboring Denmark's approach to immigration provides a useful contrast with Sweden. The countries are more similar to one another (linguistically, culturally, socially, and economically) than they are to any other European nation, and so a comparison is instructive. Unlike Sweden, Denmark has adopted a restrictive immigration policy focused less on gauzy humanitarian ideals than on economic need, and one that also places a premium on integrating those immigrants it does accept. It has enforced symbolic policies aimed at discouraging irregular migration (like confiscating valuables over a certain monetary amount and placing advertisements in newspapers dissuading migrants from making the long and arduous journey to Europe), which some have derided as inhumane.

Yet by only admitting a volume of migrants acceptable to the broad consensus of Danish society, Denmark has avoided the negative consequences Sweden has incurred by taking in so many people. Denmark's right-populist party, the Danish People's Party, is not as extreme as the SD, and its tacit inclusion in various center-right governments has not adversely affected Denmark's liberal democratic bona fides or its vital contributions to the liberal world order. Denmark remains a staunch American ally and one of the most robust (on a per capita basis) contributors to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, for example.<sup>25</sup>

Across Europe, the failure to control external immigration and the inability to fully integrate newcomers risk elevating into power political parties that are not only nativist, but opposed to the liberal world order more broadly. To be sure, populist parties often exaggerate the downsides of immigration and scapegoat immigrants as terrorists and criminals. But to echo Ivan Krastev's warning, "In democratic politics, perceptions are the only reality that matters."<sup>26</sup> If a perception exists among European voters that mainstream political leaders are unable or unwilling to control immigration, and if this perception festers, then political forces that would upset Europe's postwar political, economic, and security arrangements will gain strength.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The task for Europe's centrist parties on matters of national identity and immigration, then, must be to better represent the views of their constituents. This is a particular duty of center-right and Christian democratic parties, whose traditional role in postwar Europe has been the articulation of a healthy patriotism and national sentiment.<sup>27</sup> In many European nations, large pluralities or even majorities believe that most immigrants coming to their country are not refugees or asylum-seekers fleeing violence and persecution (in which case Europe has a legal duty to shelter them), but rather economic migrants. Considering the 2016 statement by EU Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans that 60 percent of the people entering the bloc at the time were indeed economic migrants, they are not wrong in this assumption.<sup>28</sup> Political leaders must therefore be more discriminate in how they apply the terms "refugee" and "economic migrant," as a continued blurring of the clear, legal distinction between the two will only play into the hands of populists who would completely deny entrance to both.

The vast majority of Europeans want drastic decreases in immigration. Eventually, they are going to get it. (Indeed, in the form of Brexit, the British people already did so via a political means—leaving the EU—once thought inconceivable.) Who will deliver this policy goal to them? To ensure that the answer to this question is not the far right, the center-right will need to find solutions that are both workable and humane.

Supporting economic development in Africa, the Middle East, and other regions of the world that are sending migrants toward Europe is one way to reduce migratory pressures over the long term. Throwing aid money at governments is not a solution, but opening up markets to producers in these countries is. Additionally, pushing the asylum process outside the continent, perhaps via the creation of "regional disembarkation platforms" where potential asylees will have their claims processed, a proposal the

EU Commission has endorsed, is one that center-right parties should back. Increased funding for the body's Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, is a cause around which the vast majority of the European public could be rallied. This agency need not be fully autonomous; more important is that it fill the gaps in national border protection capacities.

European governments will also have to do a better job at deporting migrants whose asylum claims have been rejected. Voters intuitively (and correctly) realize that once migrants make their way into the EU, there is little chance of them being deported if their asylum claims fail. Indeed, according to European Commission data, just 36.6 percent of failed asylum claimants are sent back to their home countries.<sup>29</sup> The experience of one such failed asylum-seeker, a Tunisian named Anis Amri who killed 12 people in a December 2016 truck attack on a Berlin Christmas market, demonstrates the weaknesses and potential dangers of the current system. Denied an Italian residence permit in 2011, Amri was imprisoned after setting fire to a government shelter. Upon his release (when he ought to have been deported), he moved to Germany, where his multiple applications for asylum (under several false identities) were rejected. Though he was subject to deportation, the German government lost track of his whereabouts and the Tunisian government refused to accept him back. It was in the midst of this bureaucratic confusion and incompetence that he was radicalized and carried out his deadly attack. Preventing such cases from occurring by making it harder to enter Europe illegally is a way to both protect against terrorism and earn back the trust of European publics.

In exchange for these measures aimed at reducing external immigration into the EU, Europe's center right should work to convince their more recalcitrant ideological brethren among the body's newer members to help share the burden of finding homes for those migrants whose asylum claims have been successfully processed. Taking part in the European project—which substantial majorities

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in Hungary and Poland, whose governments have fought the EU on its migrant distribution efforts, continue to support—entails solidarity. In the context of external migration, solidarity means that those countries which, by dint of geography, receive more migrants (namely, the Mediterranean states), should not have to bear the full burden of future migratory flows.

However, no state should be forced to take migrants it does not want. And, as events over the past four years demonstrate, there is no means by which the European Commission can force recalcitrant members to do so. One proposal to alleviate the problem of irregular migration is a “Tradable Refugee-Admission Quota” regime, whereby nations that do not wish to accept refugees can pay others to bear their share of the burden.<sup>30</sup> Another proposal is an “international refugee match system,” where nations and refugees can effectively “choose” each other.<sup>31</sup> Such a program is also likely to result in better integration, in contrast to systems where countries accept migrants without public buy-in.

Regardless of how the challenge of future irregular migration to Europe is handled, its continued existence as a specter haunting the continent is one that demagogues will use to bash the European Union as a whole, attack mainstream political leaders, and draw public support for their illiberal political programs. The danger here is that voters, tempted by a simple yet seductive message on immigration, will overlook a party’s hostility to NATO, the trans-Atlantic relationship, judicial independence, media freedom, political pluralism, and other markers of adherence to liberal order so as to achieve more restrictive immigration policies. The neutralization of irregular immigration as a matter of serious ideological contestation—while continuing to provide safe channels for legal immigration, democratically decided upon—must therefore be a priority for European leaders.

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