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The Conflict Between European Identity and Right-Wing Populism: From the Identity Crisis to Political Turmoil

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Abstract

The idea of the "European Union" is based not only on the efforts of European states to create a new political entity, but also on the understanding of building a European identity and preserving European values. However, the economic crises, migration waves, and global uncertainties experienced particularly in the 21st century have rendered EU identity increasingly subject to serious questioning. The biggest obstacle to full integration into the European Union is the rise of right-wing populist movements, a factor that must be taken into account in European politics and which has been on the rise recently. The aim of this study is to analyze the friction between right-wing movements and European identity, and the resulting identity crisis in Europe.

While the elements that constitute European identity are high values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, right-wing and nationalist rhetoric is damaging the nature of these values and plunging European identity into a deep crisis. This conflict constitutes not only an identity crisis but also a political struggle that will shape the future of Europe. Therefore, examining the conflict between EU identity and right-wing populism is of great importance both academically and practically. This study adopts a literature review and an analytical approach in order to understand these dynamics and to propose possible solutions.

Key words: EU Identity, Right-Wing Populism, European Elections

JEL Codes: F50, F53, F59

1. Introduction

The far-right and nationalist movements that held political power in Europe during World War II and, although they lost their power after the war, have recently re-emerged with renewed strength (Aktas, 2024:592), have led to a debate and conflict between national identity and European identity in the European integration process. This conflict will affect European politics in many areas, including social, political, and economic, depending on which identity is

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preferred. This conflict forms the basis of recent debates about the scope and dimensions of identity.

While the EU attempts to create a sense of shared belonging among its citizens based on universal values, as opposed to traditional understandings such as ethnic, language, and religion, and tries to establish this understanding through institutional mechanisms, right-wing organizations try to influence European public opinion based on old traditional beliefs and gain power by being active, especially in the field of protest (Pirro et al., 2025:7).

Right-wing approaches, which are not actually opposed to the phenomenon of migration but are characterized by racist rhetoric, particularly against Muslim and African migrants (Wojczewski, 2026:17), and by prioritizing state sovereignty they have begun to position themselves as a significant opposition force within the EU, as seen in their success in the European Parliament elections due to the shortcomings in EU integration policies. In this way, these groups are gaining more opportunities to participate in shaping EU policies. The most obvious example of this is seen in the tightening of the EU's migration policy or the reduction of EU bureaucratic processes.

The EU uses the rule of law, along with strategic tools such as economic and social policies to combat right-wing movements on multiple fronts, including in France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland. However, the EU faces an existential threat within itself. This study aims to explain the extent of this threat and the nature and scope of the fight against it, to reveal the impact of right-wing movements on EU policies and the measures taken by the EU against these movements, and to analyze these measures through case studies.

2. Literature Review

The importance given to human rights and human dignity, respect for different cultures, and the ideal of democracy have always been on Europe's agenda, and these principles form the building blocks of European identity. (Habermas, 2001). However, the economic and social crises experienced particularly in the 21st century have led to the questioning of this identity. Right-wing populist parties have become a significant political force by capitalizing on this crisis through nationalist discourses, anti-immigration sentiments, and anti-EU rhetoric (Mudde, 2019). As seen in the examples of France, Italy, and Hungary, many right-wing movements have gained public support by advancing arguments for the protection of national sovereignty and national identity, and by opposing the integration policies of the EU

The idea of a European union based on shared values has been the most important principle applied in the construction of European identity. This process, initiated in the post-WWII era through the pursuit of peace and stability, has progressively expanded from economic integration to encompass political and cultural dimensions (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009). Through its institutional frameworks and policy mechanisms, the EU has continuously sought to foster a common sense of belonging among its citizenry. However, this trajectory of identity

formation has inherently carried the potential for conflict with deeply entrenched national identities. Specifically, the EU's "multi-level governance" architecture has generated institutional and normative tensions between the preservation of national sovereignty and the cultivation of a supranational European identity (Hooghe and Marks, 2001).

The European Union's identity emerged as a result of the interaction of many social, political, and economic factors, and this interaction has strengthened the established structure. From a cultural perspective, the EU has sought to cultivate a shared identity grounded in common history, values, and symbols. For instance, symbolic constructs such as the European Flag, the European Anthem, and Europe Day have been strategically deployed to consolidate this collective identity (Shore, 2000). From a political standpoint, the functioning of the democratic institution, the fact that human rights are the most important principle taken into account in the functioning of the Union's structure, and the unwavering belief in the rule of law have emerged as the dominant factors shaping European identity.

Economic integration has constituted one of the most tangible dimensions of European identity formation. Initiatives such as the Single Market and the Euro have not only strengthened economic interdependence among member states but have also fostered the development of a shared European identity (McNamara, 2015). Nevertheless, the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent economic downturn prompted significant questioning of this identity project. In particular, the severe economic hardships experienced in Southern European countries intensified criticism of the EU's economic policies and generated tensions within the broader process of identity construction (Jones, 2018).

The most significant challenge in the European integration process is the contrast between the ancient ethnic and national identities of individual states and the non-traditional, inclusive identities they seek to construct. While national identities are historically shaped through cultural, political, and social ties, European identity has been constructed upon common values and supranational institutions within a multinational framework. This tension has become increasingly pronounced, particularly during periods of deeper European integration (Smith, 1992).

National identities are typically rooted in tangible elements such as local languages, traditions, and historical narratives, whereas European identity has been constructed around more abstract and universal values. As a result, national identities have often been regarded as a heritage that must be preserved, while European identity has been perceived as a "supranational identity" (Delanty & Rumford, 2005). Nevertheless, this supranational identity has not always aligned harmoniously with national identities. Particularly, right-wing populist parties have transformed this tension into a political instrument by framing European identity as an existential threat to national sovereignty (De Vries, 2018).

Hungary and Poland, both Central European countries, can be cited as examples of states that believe the principles that form the identity of the EU, such as human rights and the rule of law, often conflict with their own national identities and national sovereignty. This perception has contributed to growing resistance among national governments toward EU policies and has intensified skepticism regarding European identity (Krastev, 2017). From this perspective, the UK's

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process of leaving the EU is significant because it exemplifies the conflict between national identity and EU identity. (Hobolt, 2016).

Resolving the identity crisis experienced by the EU and its member states requires a correct socio-cultural approach and a new perspective based on redefining the problem within the citizen-state-EU triangle and fostering a sense of belonging (Risse, 2010).

2.1. The Conceptual Framework and History of Right-Wing Populism

The twenty-year period between the two world wars is characterized by the rise and rise to power of ultra-nationalist and fascist parties. It is possible to trace the origins of right-wing organizations currently operating in Europe back to this period. However, following the Second World War, these movements became largely marginalized and continued their existence within democratic systems (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Beginning in the 1980s, right-wing movements started to regain strength through anti-immigrant rhetoric and criticisms directed toward European integration.

On the eve of the transition to the 21st century, the emergence of the Freedom Party in Austria and the National Front in France constituted modern examples of right-wing and nationalist politics. By employing themes such as nationalism, anti-immigration discourse, and Euroscepticism, these parties succeeded in attracting the support of voters who felt unrepresented by traditional right- and left-wing parties (Mudde, 2007).

The fundamental argument of right-wing politics is to emphasize the conflict between the interests of the people as a mass and the interests of the ruling elite classes, and to draw attention to the corruption of the elites. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2019). This discourse becomes particularly effective in contexts such as economic crises, waves of immigration, and political scandals.

Among the core characteristics of right-wing populism are nationalism, authoritarianism, and nativism. Nativism is based on the belief that foreigners have a negative impact on society and forms the foundation of anti-immigration policies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In addition, right-wing populist parties adopt a skeptical stance toward traditional media and political institutions, while claiming to represent "the voice of the people."

A recent development is the increasing strength of right-wing formations across Europe. For example, Lega came to power in Italy, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, and Fidesz in Hungary. A common feature of these governments is their opposition and political resistance to the common policies of the European Union. By emphasizing national sovereignty, these parties have framed European integration as a threat to national identity and culture (Pirro & van Kessel, 2017).

The point to emphasize here is that the rise of right-wing movements in Europe should not be perceived merely as a political trend, but also as a harbinger and reflection of a transformation taking place in European politics. These movements have emerged as a reaction to phenomena such as globalization and multiculturalism and continue to shape the future of European politics.

2.2. Conflicts between EU Identity and Right-Wing Populism

The issues of migration and multiculturalism stand out at this point because the interaction between these two concepts constitutes the fundamental driving force behind the arguments put forward by right-wing movements in Europe, and their impact on European identity. Since its establishment, the EU has adopted policies that support the integration of migrants by emphasizing values such as multiculturalism, human rights, and social cohesion (Kymlicka, 2012). However, in contrast to the EU's general policy, right-wing groups opposed these policies, advocating for a return to national identity and an approach that opposed cultural homogenization.

The main focus of right-wing groups is anti-immigrant sentiment. In this regard, right-wing approaches attempt to manipulate public opinion by claiming that immigrants increase unemployment rates in their host countries, reduce social welfare at the expense of local citizens, and cause an increase in crime rates (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In particular, the 2015 refugee crisis further strengthened this discourse and increased the electoral success of right-wing populist parties. The rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric, as generated by the Alternative for Germany party in Germany and the National Rally in France, can be assessed from this perspective (Arzheimer, 2018).

Multiculturalism policies have also been frequently criticized by right-wing populist parties. These parties argue that multiculturalism weakens national identity and threatens social cohesion (Joppke, 2017). In the Netherlands, as in the United Kingdom, some parties, such as the Party for Freedom, have increased their support among political voters and accelerated their rise by advocating anti-Islam, anti-immigrant, and anti-multiculturalism views. (Vossen, 2016).

The EU’s migration and multiculturalism policies are in constant conflict with these national-level reactions. In particular, in Eastern European countries, EU policies such as migrant quotas have been rejected on the grounds of defending national sovereignty and identity (Krastev, 2017). This situation complicates the EU’s integration project and supports the rise of right-wing populist parties.

The European Union is frequently subject to criticism regarding democracy and bureaucracy due to its institutional structure and decision-making mechanisms. The so-called "democratic deficit" of the EU has particularly emerged through criticisms that decision-making processes are distant from citizens and lack transparency (Follesdal & Hix, 2006). The fact that the European Commission is not directly elected by EU citizens underscores this point. This situation has led the EU to be perceived as an "elite project" and has strengthened the anti-elitist rhetoric of populist parties (Mair, 2013).

One of the prominent characteristics of right-wing parties is their focus on the issue of political sovereignty. These parties argue that the European Union does not adequately defend the rights of the people they represent, and therefore, the transfer of sovereignty to the EU in matters of national rights actually threatens the sovereignty of individual states (De Vries, 2018). Such criticisms of the EU's

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bureaucratic structure were a central issue in the debates and outcome surrounding the United Kingdom's departure from the EU (Hobolt, 2016).

Creating insecurity and unrest within society, or exploiting existing unrest, is a traditional tactic of right-wing parties. The politics of othering, particularly targeting Muslims and immigrants, is essential for increasing political support for right-wing parties. (Mudde, 2007). Muslims are often portrayed as a threat to Western values, while immigrants are associated with threats to unemployment, crime rates, and the social welfare system (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In particular, the September 11 attacks and subsequent terrorist incidents facilitated the framing of Muslims as the "other." Right-wing populist parties attempt to legitimize their anti-Muslim rhetoric by portraying Islam as incompatible with Western democratic and secular values (Betz, 2013). For instance, in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), described Islam as a "fascist ideology," thereby justifying his anti-Muslim policies (Vossen, 2016).

Right-wing parties, through their rhetoric, claim that immigrants harm the national identities of EU member states and threaten the homogeneity of these countries. This discourse has been further strengthened, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis. Right-wing populist parties frame immigrants as a group that abuses the welfare system and increases crime rates, thereby manipulating public fears (Wodak, 2015). For example, in Hungary, the Fidesz party has legitimized its anti-immigrant policies by claiming to protect national identity (Krastev, 2017).

2.3. The Impact of Right-Wing Populism on EU Policies

The influence of right-wing formations, particularly on EU policies, has become increasingly noticeable in recent years. These movements have generally adopted an anti-EU discourse, developing a rhetoric that emphasizes national sovereignty and claims to defend the interests of the people (Mudde, 2007). The extent to which right-wing approaches have harmed EU integration is clearly seen in the issue of migration, and consequently in economic and governance matters (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018).

Right-wing approaches, by their very nature, emphasize the nation-state and argue that nation-states should operate within a more limited framework when sharing powers with the EU. These parties, which have gained increasing support within the EU, have adopted an anti-EU agenda by targeting immigration policies, multiculturalism discourse, and economic integration processes (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). In particular, the Brexit process has strengthened right-wing populist critiques of the EU’s democratic structure and has led to increased Euroscepticism in many member states (Goodwin & Heath, 2016).

The rise in demands for increased national sovereignty and the setbacks in EU integration policies are significant in demonstrating the negative and far-reaching impact of right-wing movements on the EU. The rise of right-wing populism in Europe has made EU reform initiatives more difficult and has led to the adoption of more conservative approaches in areas such as migration policy, environmental regulations, and economic reforms (Wodak, 2015).

The greatest example of the resurgence of right-wing movements in Europe is their success in increasing their vote share, particularly in European Parliament elections (Pirro & Taggart, 2021). This rise has enabled anti-integration and nationalist discourses within the EU to gain greater visibility in the political arena.

In national elections as well, right-wing populist parties have either become part of the government or emerged as significant opposition forces in many European countries. For example, the National Rally (Rassemblement National) led by Marine Le Pen in France, Fidesz under Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and the Lega Party under Matteo Salvini in Italy demonstrate how right-wing populist movements have influenced large segments of the electorate and exerted pressure on national politics (Pappas & Kriesi, 2015).

The influence of right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament is directly reflected in the processes of shaping EU policies. In particular, proposals for stricter migration policies, strengthening national sovereignty, and reducing EU bureaucracy have come onto the agenda under the pressure of these parties (Rooduijn, 2020). Moreover, right-wing populist groups have been able to defend their anti-EU agendas more effectively by forming different coalitions in the European Parliament.

The greatest harm that right-wing movements inflict on the EU is that they increase public skepticism regarding the EU's integration policies. This skepticism not only influences public opinion but also fuels anti-immigration policies, thereby undermining the EU's fundamental values.

Therefore, the EU has taken action against right-wing formations using different strategies. With the increasing anti-EU discourse and emphasis on national sovereignty by right-wing populist parties, the EU has adopted various measures at both political and institutional levels to respond to these movements (Schimmelfennig, 2018).

One of the EU's strategies for combating right-wing movements is to use an approach that establishes the rule of law as a tool. In this context, the EU has taken sanctions decisions against the relevant states, as seen in the examples of Hungary and Poland (Sedelmeier, 2017). For example, in response to criticisms that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has weakened democratic institutions and subjected the judiciary to political pressure, the EU has invoked Article 7 and threatened to suspend Hungary’s voting rights within the EU (Kelemen, 2020).

In addition, the EU has sought to neutralize right-wing populist discourse by placing greater emphasis on social policies and economic integration processes. In particular, The EU uses funds, economic support packages, and other similar economic tools to reduce the influence of right-wing groups. (Vachudova, 2021). At the same time, under pressure from right-wing populist movements, the EU has attempted to soften their criticisms by implementing stricter regulations in migration policies (Boswell, 2019).

The increased visibility of right-wing parties, along with the seats they have gained in the European Parliament, have begun to shape the policies of the Union. This situation has made it necessary to re-establish the balance of power and politics within the EU (Rooduijn, 2020). In this context, the EU’s strategic responses to right-wing populist movements include both legal sanctions and efforts to protect

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democratic values, as well as pragmatic adaptation policies aimed at mitigating right-wing criticisms.

The 2015 migration crisis was a significant turning point in the rise of right-wing parties. From that point on, right-wing groups began advocating anti-immigrant policies by amplifying and appealing to general European public opinion. By using the anti-immigrant sentiment they fanned in public opinion, they began to gain influence in European politics (Betz & Meret, 2021). In Germany, the Alternative for Germany party, in France the National Front, and in Italy the Lega party have opposed EU policies and emphasized the importance of effective internal and external border controls (Geddes & Scholten, 2016).

The EU's solidarity and quota-based policies in response to the migration crisis have been framed by right-wing populist discourse as "Brussels imposing on member states," leading to a decline in public trust in the EU (Zaun, 2018). This situation has legitimized anti-immigrant policies of right-wing populist governments, particularly in Eastern Europe, and deepened divisions within the EU (Börzel & Risse, 2020).

Right-wing approaches, which highlight issues such as income inequality and worsening economic conditions for workers—by-products of the neoliberal global economy—have also manifested themselves in the formulation and implementation of EU economic reforms (Rodrik, 2018). For example, the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) movement in France has reinforced arguments that the EU's economic policies negatively affect people's living standards and has facilitated the adoption of right-wing populist discourse by broad segments of society (Göpffarth, 2021).

Right-wing parties have also tried to influence public opinion and gain support by portraying the EU's fiscal tightening policies as the Union's intervention in national economies (Matthijs, 2017). In conclusion, the EU's responses to the migration crisis and economic reform processes have facilitated the production of right-wing populist discourse, which in turn has led to fluctuations in public support for the EU.

3. Case Studies

3.1. France: Marine Le Pen and the Strategies of the National Front

When we examine the influence of right-wing parties in France, it is clear that Marine Le Pen's Front National focuses on national sovereignty by promoting French nationalism and encouraging an anti-EU stance (Stockemer, 2017). Marine Le Pen has rebranded her party by distancing it from traditional far-right elements (a strategy of de-demonization) and developed a populist discourse appealing to broader segments of society (Ivaldi, 2019).

The National Front's criticisms of EU policies are concentrated in three main areas. First, the party's economic policies argue that the EU's free market mechanisms weaken France's national economy. In particular, discourses advocating withdrawal from the Eurozone and the re-establishment of a national currency have been developed (Goodliffe, 2021). Second, migration and security policies constitute one of the party's strongest electoral strategies, and Marine Le

Pen argues that the EU's open-border policies pose a threat to national security by framing migration as a security issue (Mudde, 2019). Third, the sovereignty of the nation-state is based on the claim that the EU interferes "from outside" in French politics, and in this context it is argued that the EU's powers should be limited (Shields, 2013).

While the rise of right-wing Le Pen may not have secured her the presidency domestically, it has increased her influence in European politics by expanding her number of seats in the European Parliament (Ivaldi, 2021).

3.2. Hungary: Viktor Orbán and Anti-EU Discourses

Victor Orban's influence has been felt for a long time in Hungarian politics. Emerging with right-wing rhetoric, Orban operated within the traditional right-wing political sphere, supporting anti-EU and anti-immigrant policies (Kelemen, 2020).

The Orban administration opposes democratic pluralism, acts contrary to the fundamental values of the EU, and its nationalist stance serves to expose the illiberal side of democratic principles. (Bogaards, 2018). The Fidesz government frames the EU's criticisms regarding the rule of law and media freedom as "interference in national independence," accusing the EU of interfering in Hungary's internal affairs (Enyedi, 2020).

However, Orbán's strongest political asset is anti-immigration. During the 2015 refugee crisis, Hungary refused to comply with the EU's refugee quota system and implemented strict border policies (Vachudova, 2021). Orbán has sharply criticized the EU's migration policies, defining them as a threat to the cultural integrity of Christian Europe and strongly condemning the Brussels leadership (Batory, 2019).

The EU has failed to reduce public support for the Orban regime in Hungary through the sanctions it has imposed, and the Orban administration has established itself as the strongest right-wing political force among EU countries. Despite the EU's threats of financial sanctions against Hungary, Orbán's defiance of the EU demonstrates the persistence and influence of right-wing populist discourse in Hungary (Sedelmeier, 2017).

3.3. Italy: The League Party and Immigration Policies

Similar to right-wing approaches in other parts of Europe, the League Party in Italy has developed an anti-EU policy discourse based on anti-immigrant sentiment (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021). The League has developed a populist discourse that frames the EU's economic policies and migration management as failures, while claiming to defend national interests (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2019).

One of the League's strongest political tools has been anti-immigration policies. Especially after the 2015 refugee crisis, the League under Salvini's leadership advocated for strict measures against migrants arriving via the Mediterranean and argued that Italy should act independently of EU migration policies (Tarchi, 2020). The policies implemented during Salvini's tenure as Minister of the Interior (2018–2019) directly challenged the EU's solidarity mechanisms by banning migrant rescue ships from Italian ports.

The League's Euroscepticism has not been limited to migration policies; it has also included criticisms of EU fiscal policies. Salvini described Italy's obligation to comply with EU budget rules as a threat to the country's economic sovereignty and opposed the EU's austerity policies (Matthijs, 2017).

However, due to Italy's political dynamics, the League has sometimes been forced to develop pragmatic relations with the EU. Although Salvini's populist rhetoric has gained broad public support during periods of economic crisis in Italy, EU financial assistance and changes in Italian governments have made it difficult for the League to maintain a fully anti-EU stance (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021).

4. Conclusion

This study reveals and analyzes the impact of right-wing movements on EU policies and the measures taken by the EU against these movements.

According to the research findings, right-wing approaches are trying to undermine the EU's process of building a common identity by presenting national identities as a counter-argument. Although EU identity is intended to be developed as a result of the integration process, right-wing populist parties resist this process through discourses defending national sovereignty. In particular, issues such as migration, economy, and democratic representation stand out as the main areas of criticism directed by right-wing populist movements toward the EU.

From a right-wing political perspective, these groups are playing an increasingly active role in the discussion, formulation, and implementation of EU policies. Conversely, the EU appears to be developing various anti-right economic and political strategies and basing its struggle on these strategies.

In conclusion, although the impact of right-wing populist movements on European integration constitutes a significant challenge, the flexible and inclusive strategies that the EU will develop in response to its identity crisis will be decisive in maintaining the stability of the Union and in developing a more resilient model of integration in the future.

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