

Historical legacies and national political contexts have shaped today's far-right in Eastern and Central Europe

By Democratic Audit UK

*The far-right is in the ascendancy right across Europe, with parties like France's National Front, Greece's Golden Dawn, and Hungary's Jobbik seeing impressive electoral gains. But while parties in Western Europe do so by resorting to arguments about immigration and other cultural issues, the rise of these parties in former communist states is tied more closely with national political context and the transition from communism itself, according to **Andrea L.P. Pirro**.*



What lies behind Jobbik's rise? (Credit: [Tutu \(ronda kereszt / nasty crucifix\)](#) CC BY SA 2.0)

Recent developments in the populist and ultranationalist camps have catalysed new interest in far right parties in post-communist countries. Over the past decades, the attention mainly focused on far right parties in Western Europe; in turn, little clarity surrounded the same phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe. In a way, it could be argued that the absence of a consistent electoral trend has hindered systematic research on the far right in the region. Indeed, since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the far right preserved a certain degree of continuity only across movement sectors and sub-cultural groups.

Generally speaking, far right parties in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be considered a reaction to [immigrant populations](#), [worsening economic conditions](#), or [the spread of liberal values](#) – questions which are often used to explain the emergence of similar organisations in Western Europe. First, despite their recent accession to the EU, former Eastern Bloc countries are not (yet) destination for immigration; second, the majority of these parties broke into national political arenas amid positive economic trends; third, their alleged reaction to a 'post-materialist revolution' largely remains a West European affair.

Notwithstanding the differences coming from their different contexts (see below), far right parties share broad ideological and organisational features across Europe. In his book on the [populist radical right](#), Cas Mudde identified three core ideological features shared by this party family. These features are nativism (i.e. a radical and exclusionary version of nationalism), authoritarianism (i.e. the belief in a strictly ordered society), and populism (i.e. a view that considers society to be divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps – 'the

pure people' vs. 'the corrupt elite' –, and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people). At the structural level, these organisations contest elections like political parties, but mobilise public support in a way that resembles social movements. Moreover, their organisation is 'fluid'; some of them maintain a hierarchical structure firmly centred on their leaders (e.g. Ataka in Bulgaria), while others preserve a looser organisation with a dynamic leadership (e.g. Jobbik in Hungary).

As the far right is neither a new nor homogenous phenomenon, it is useful to account for the different mobilisation sources of these parties. Far right parties in Central and Eastern Europe can be interpreted as organisations that react to the transformations of 1989, and resort to historical legacies and contextual idiosyncrasies to frame their ideology. In other words, these parties evaluate negatively the process of socio-cultural, political, and economic change that unfolded in 1989, and articulate their core ideological features (nativism, authoritarianism, and populism) over a set of 'pre-communist' and 'post-communist' issues. In addition, some of them may be found advocating leftist economic views somewhat indebted to the legacy of state socialism.

Pre-communist issues such as clericalism or irredentism draw on the political cultures and ideas of the pre-communist period. The ideas at the core of these issues often compare with those of the authoritarian movements of interwar Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, far right parties in Central and Eastern Europe often emphasise national unity through clerical and irredentist platforms. They usually call for a greater interpenetration of Church and state, and – depending on country-specific legacies of pan-nationalism – the redefinition of state borders on ethnic and historical grounds.

Post-communist issues are rooted in the post-communist period and refer to current political issues (i.e. ethnic minorities, corruption, and the EU). Far right parties in the region have been responsible for the politicisation of minority issues – especially, but not exclusively, targeting Roma communities. While the Roma population is usually linked to a specific kind of criminality ('gypsy criminality', as dubbed by the Hungarian [Jobbik](#)), other indigenous minorities are considered a threat to the socio-cultural and political homogeneity of the nation-state. Although issues such as anti-corruption and Euroscepticism are not exclusive ideological entitlement of the far right in the region, here they remain questions defined by the post-communist context.

For example, corruption is considered one of the disastrous effects of the transition process; then, specific political and economic elites (often associated to nomenklatura structures) are blamed for criminal and 'anti-national' conduct in the privatisation of national assets. In a similar way, the threat to national sovereignty posed by the EU should be read through the lens of the national independence recently regained by these countries and the anti-Western attitudes of these parties. In the most extreme cases, the EU is deemed a colonising power such as the US; therefore, it is not uncommon for these parties to call for withdrawal from the EU and advocate alternative forms of international cooperation lying outside Western spheres of influence.

Pre-communist and post-communist issues represent the discursive palette available to far right parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Still, their ultimate ideological configuration largely depends on national opportunity structures. On the whole, far right parties in Central and Eastern Europe are fairly like-minded and bear substantial differences compared to their Western counterparts; yet, they do not constitute an entirely homogenous group. For a significant portion of these parties, the issue of ethnic minorities is both ideologically defining and [electorally profitable](#).

However, a case like Poland – a country with no sizeable ethnic minorities and external homelands – shows that the question of nativism can be equally articulated in cultural, rather than ethnic, terms. Be that as it may, by reviving a pre-communist past and denouncing the perverse effects of the post-communist transition, far right parties in Central and Eastern Europe break with the communist past of their countries and set themselves in opposition to the (liberal democratic) status quo.

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[Andrea L. P. Pirro](#) is research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Political Change (CIRCaP), University of Siena, and co-convenor of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy. His contributions appeared in *Government and Opposition*, *East European Politics*, *Intereconomics*, as well as a number of edited volumes. His book on the ideology, impact, and electoral performance of populist radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe is forthcoming on Routledge.