



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

THE RISE OF POPULISM
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL MINORITIES

Keynote speech
by
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to the seminar
"European Year of Intercultural Dialogue: The Minority Agenda"

hosted by the Socialist Group in the European Parliament (PSE Group)

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Brussels, Belgium – 11 December 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to the European Parliament.

As High Commissioner on National Minorities, I am particularly happy to be here since the European Union has been the single, most effective contributor to interethnic peace and security in post-Cold War Europe, and continues to be one of my key partners. The 1993 Copenhagen criteria for the EU accession – in particular, the requirement to respect minority rights, – have helped my predecessors achieve significant results in a number of countries that are now full-fledged members of the EU club.

The EU's role in advancing the minority agenda is undisputed. This makes this gathering such a highly appropriate venue at which to discuss new developments in interethnic relations. The rise of populism is one of them.

How did it emerge? What is its impact on interethnic relations? Do we exaggerate its significance?

Populism is not necessarily dangerous. In some ways, social democratic movements in late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe were populists. Whether we are social democrats or not, it is easy to agree that the emergence of the social democracy did help us achieve greater social justice and empower a large section of the public.

Populism becomes a menace when it employs xenophobia and extreme nationalism to further its aims. We should be concerned about this brand of populism.

The Roma community and the injured policemen in the northern Czech town of Litvinov would certainly agree with me. Last November, almost exactly 70 years since *Kristallnacht*, hundreds of extremists, masked and dressed in black, attacked the Roma neighbourhood there. We all thought that the term “pogrom” had been left behind in the last century. It seems however to be making a return, in the very heart of Europe.

I believe that the political mainstream can and should do more to counter such populists. Divisive politics leads to the destruction, rather than the consolidation of our States. It

fractures our societies and makes living together in harmony less likely. Ultimately, it results in interethnic clashes and violence.

Let us examine together how populism emerged and, more importantly, what we can do about it.

There is a widespread consensus in academia that there are two reasons for the emergence of populism in Western Europe. The first is value change. The most conspicuous conflict in post-war Europe has centred on economic resource allocation. As class conflict over the economy receded, value conflict emerged. Ronald Inglehart has famously described it as “post-materialist”. The attitudes of citizens change. They are less concerned with material well-being and have switched their concerns to more qualitative areas.¹ It would be naïve however to disregard themes such as unemployment, inflation and welfare provision. Indeed, surveys show that these are still important for the bulk of the population.² But it would be even more naïve to assume that these issues remain the principal source of social conflict.

The second reason is the incapacity of traditional parties to represent new issues. New issues include environment, national identity, immigration, moral traditionalism (mainly concerning sexuality and family roles) and law and order. Many voters feel that the traditional political parties have disregarded these issues and failed to take up and implement their demands. For example, many blue-colour workers – the electoral stronghold of the social democrats – have fallen prey to the populist rhetoric.

Populism is also on the march in Central and Eastern Europe. The reasons for its prominence there are both different and similar. I tend to agree with the factors outlined in the recent book "Democracy, Populism and Minority Rights", edited by my co-panellists, Hannes Swoboda and Jan Marinus Wiersma.

The populists’ success in Central and Eastern Europe has to do with the painful transition from Communism. Once the initial enthusiasm for democracy faded, many people felt that they bore the brunt of the “Big Bang” economic reform. They loathed the Communists but

¹ Roland Inglehart: *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

they grew disillusioned with the reformers too. Hence, all sorts of populists have become an almost natural choice for the voters. Corruption in the new governments made many people more and more disenchanted with the political mainstream.

The book also points to the fact that both the right and the left in Central and Eastern Europe pursued almost identical policies. Economic austerity and EU-NATO membership have been the aspirations or uneasy choices of both camps. Again, it has become difficult for the average voter to differentiate between the traditional right and left. The general weakness of political parties, trade unions and civil society in the post-totalitarian societies made it easier for the populists to gain a foothold and prosper.

To sum up, extreme populism – both East and West of Vienna as we say in the OSCE – plays on human insecurity. It rouses passions by saying that “outsiders” – foreigners, homosexuals and minorities – intrude on our values. It claims that “aliens” are stealing our jobs, abusing social security and reducing opportunities. It appeals to nationalism and highlights the inaction of mainstream parties on the new issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Roma community has become a favourite target of extreme populists.

Roma are the largest minority in Europe. And the most discriminated one. An examination of their plight should give us important insights into why extremism is on the rise.

In most countries, Roma live on the fringes of society. They experience severe poverty and lack of housing. They face restricted access to health care and education and high levels of unemployment. They are excluded from political decision-making and being members of the police service. As a result, the Roma communities are exploited by criminals, such as drug and human traffickers. In some countries we hear that the extremist networks are trying to recruit the Roma.

² *Standard Eurobarometer 69*, 1. Values of Europeans, November 2008, pp.65-70. According to the data from the study, the post-materialist rate has fallen slightly in the European Union compared to the autumn 2005 poll.

The governments of Central and Eastern Europe – where most Roma live – are not doing enough to rectify the situation and integrate the Roma. Marginalization of the Roma makes them an easy scapegoat for the extreme populists. It provides fertile ground in which to cultivate interethnic tension between the Roma and the majority population.

Faced with persistent discrimination and poverty, the Roma are looking elsewhere in search of a better lot. They migrate to "Old Europe." This is a new phenomenon which has direct relevance to our discussion today. For many years, the Roma from outside the EU arrived in the EU as asylum-seekers or economic migrants. The EU enlargement and the expansion of the Schengen area make their migration even easier.

The arrival of the Roma is challenging for both local authorities and communities. So far, the overwhelming response has been to merely tolerate these new neighbours. No serious effort has been invested in their integration into society. For example, employment, education, accommodation and social services for the newcomers have all largely been ignored. The recent events in Italy are a wake-up call for policymakers in Western Europe.

The lack of integration policies gives a free hand to the populist extremists. They use isolated incidents to portray the entire Roma community as criminals. They thrive on the inaction of governments. They mobilize mobs to attack the Roma. This generates considerable friction and, as we have seen, even violence in some cases.

Having said that, I believe that the Roma have a responsibility too. Roma leaders have pointed out that the Roma have to make their own efforts to integrate even if they want to retain their traditions. The problem is that the Roma often face great challenges in meeting their responsibility. We need to empower them to do so.

As High Commissioner, I am also concerned about the impact of the populists on regional and international security. Their rhetoric poisons interethnic relations domestically. It can however have a toxic effect on inter-State relations too. A national minority in one State is often a national majority in another, the so-called kin-State. A kin-State may be right next door. Leaders in the kin-State often feel pressure to intervene; especially if their ethnic brethren experience injustice, real or perceived. This is how ethnic tension in one State can become an inter-State conflict.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The question is what can we do to counter the negative effects of populism?

One answer is that mainstream political parties must play a more prominent role. Till now the populist leaders have been setting the agenda. What is more alarming is that mainstream political parties have followed this agenda. Instead, they should be explaining the dangers of extreme nationalism to the electorate. At the same time, they have to address the anxieties of the people. They need to speak openly about integration, about managing migration. They should not shy away from the issues that are of concern to the "silent majority".

Mainstream political parties must also embrace minorities, invite them to become party members and field them as candidates in elections. By doing this, they foster a sense of belonging amongst minority communities, they give minorities a voice and a stake in governing the country, and they even gain votes.

We also need robust anti-discrimination legislation where it does not already exist. Where it does exist, it must be enforced vigorously. The justice system – courts, prosecutors and police – should be impartial and representative of the society it serves. If the Rule of Law is adhered to, minorities will feel reassured.

The populist leaders will still be able to make inflammatory speeches. These could very well damage interethnic harmony. But their words will be empty if the justice system enjoys the trust of the entire population.

The European Union's Race Directive of June 2000 and Protocol 12 to the European Convention on Human Rights are good examples of addressing a root cause of interethnic friction. The bad news is that many EU Member States have failed to implement this Directive or to ratify the Protocol.

Europe must remain a leader on minority issues. The EU needs to ensure that its members too respect and promote minority rights within their own jurisdiction. The inclusion of the minority clause in the EU Constitution and, later, in the Lisbon Treaty are good steps. But it

is important to remember that EU membership is not an exam that one passes and then promptly forgets all about. There has to be a continual review of the policies and practice of individual States within the EU with regard to minorities.

Education can play a major role in depriving the populists of their electoral base. If we are to nurture a future generation of responsible citizens, we must start early – in schools.

It is in school that children from different ethnic backgrounds meet and learn that being different does not mean being an enemy. In fact, many friendships that last a lifetime are born in the classroom. Second and third languages are mastered here. Foreign cultures become appreciated.

From my perspective, education accomplishes its mission if it is not separated along ethnic lines. It accomplishes its mission if it promotes positive values and language skills. Integrated education in multi-ethnic States gives careful consideration to the place in the school curriculum of the history and culture of all ethnic communities within a State, not only that of the national majority.

If we implement this sort of education, populists will have far fewer converts.

What we also need are strong international institutions to take on extreme nationalism. These institutions must have the powers to expose any wrongdoing. They must have the clout to call the perpetrators to account. The backing of the international community is crucial in the work of institutions such as mine. It is more difficult to sow the seeds of hatred when extreme nationalists know that others are watching.

Europe must also zoom in on the Roma situation. Not just with words, but also with deeds. Round tables, conferences and seminars are useful. But they are not a substitute for action by governments. National Roma strategies should therefore be used to foster Roma integration and inclusion. They should not be just empty documents. They must be sufficiently funded and put into practice. The implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on the Roma and Sinti of 2003 should finally become a reality.

I also believe that freedom of movement cannot be limited on the basis of ethnicity in Europe. Nor can economic opportunities and the right to pursue a better life for oneself and one's family. I therefore urge MEPs to resist any restrictions in these fields.

Better social conditions and employment opportunities for the Roma will ease tension. The populists will be left empty-handed too, when seeking a target for its anti-alien action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

People feel less secure these days. Economic and financial turmoil has left thousands of people jobless. This situation is expected to continue for some years. People are understandably angry and they look for ways to ease their frustration. In times of upheaval, the extreme populists may be tempted to exploit any ethnic cleavage. Extreme nationalism is a quick-fix way to deal with human insecurity in an economic slump.

The political mainstream must challenge extremism and intolerance. Politicians need to acknowledge and respond to the voters' frustration and heed their concerns. But they should never compromise on the key principle of respect for diversity. Those who do so undermine the very foundation of our societies.

Integrated education, strict adherence to the rule of law, energetic leadership of mainstream political parties and alert international watchdogs will help us confront extreme populism.

I look forward to the discussion and wish you every success in promoting the minority agenda in the European Union.

Thank you for your attention.