RESHAPING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Coronavirus and Europe's New Political Fissures

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When European governments imposed lockdowns to stop the spread of the new coronavirus, in most cases opposition parties were relatively supportive. The gravity of the emergency and the speed of contagion tempered normal political competition. Consensus was not absolute and, in some countries, was rather fragile; yet, in the most acute period of the pandemic, normal politics generally took a back seat.

As governments now loosen lockdown measures, political divisions are reemerging. These focus on the appropriate speed and scope of deescalation and on governments' economic recovery packages. To some extent, this shift raises the healthy prospect of open, pluralistic debate resurfacing, with opposition forces pressing governments to signal that democratic rights should soon be fully restored.

However, there are also worrying and less benign aspects of the emerging debates about reinstating democracy. Far-right parties are leading the charge against governments, adopting a democracy narrative that is opportunistic and sits uneasily with these

parties' illiberal identities. Some mainstream opposition conservative parties are also instrumentalizing a democracy discourse and playing feckless politics with the pandemic—albeit to a lesser degree.

Most progressive forces have so far prioritized the economic aspects of the postvirus recovery and risk losing control of the democracy narrative. A focus on restoring democratic rights is much needed across Europe, but it must be advanced judiciously and not unduly politicized.

CONTESTATION FROM THE RIGHT

A notable emerging feature of debates about lockdown lifting is the way many right-wing parties are adopting a narrative of restoring democracy. Concern with returning full democratic rights is, in places, evident across the political spectrum, but a number of right-wing parties have taken on this mantle with particular fervor. These include both mainstream conservative parties in opposition and those on the radical right.

Frustration is beginning to spill over into tense street protests. In France, Germany, Poland, and Spain, protesters have pushed for lockdowns to be lifted and state-of-emergency provisions to be removed. In France, some hardline elements of the Yellow Vests, a grassroots protest movement, have reappeared on the streets. These protests are mostly small and somewhat impromptu. They often flout physical distancing rules and have been roundly condemned as a risk to public health.

In a number of cases, reports have suggested that some far-right political parties have either been loosely linked to the protests or sought to take advantage of them. Even if they deny involvement, these parties have commonly refused to condemn unequivocally the protesters' actions. Many such protests have taken on a rightist-nationalist flavor.

At the party-political level, a parallel trend is emerging. In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been vociferous in calling for restrictions on civic rights to be lifted as soon as possible. In Italy, the leader of the far-right League party, Matteo Salvini, has undertaken several high-profile stunts and protests—at one stage occupying the country's parliament—to press for "the restoration of full liberties." In the Netherlands, the right-wing Party for Freedom (PVV) and Forum for Democracy have been the parties pushing most strongly for a timely relaxation of political restrictions. PVV Leader Geert Wilders has adhered to a hard line, criticizing the government's coronavirus strategy for not protecting individual freedoms.

In Austria, the right-wing Freedom Party has accused the government of overstepping the mark in its coronavirus-related restrictions. The party has charged the government with undermining the country's constitution and citizens' rights in its push for apps that trace the contacts of people who have the coronavirus and its call for citizens to abide by physical distancing rules in their private spaces. The Spanish far right Vox party has likewise adopted a bellicose stance: this illiberal, authoritarian party has awkwardly tied a democracy discourse to an express aim to unseat Spain's Socialist Workers' Party–led government.

The emerging political divide is not just about the radical right; mainstream conservative parties that are in opposition have, in some countries, been drawn to similar positions. In France, the most explicit push for restrictions to be lifted promptly has come from the main conservative opposition, The Republicans (LR). LR politicians have complained about French President Emmanuel Macron's top-down style and insisted that fully open democratic accountability must be reinstated sooner rather than later. LR members have also expressed the most serious concerns over the rights implications of the government's contact-tracing app.

In Spain, the opposition conservative Popular Party has adopted a more radical and hardline stance. It stopped supporting the Socialist government's requests in the Spanish parliament to roll over the state of emergency introduced on March 14. The party has argued that the restrictive provisions of the state of emergency are no longer needed to implement coronavirus-related measures as Spain comes out of its lockdown and that the government is hanging on to executive powers simply to circumvent democratic accountability.

The trends on the right are not uniform. Not all hard-right parties are bringing the democracy narrative to the fore to the same extent. In Belgium, the Flemish nationalist New Flemish Alliance has used the government's de-escalation plans mainly to argue that they reinforce the case for the secession of the country's Dutch-speaking north. This has made the position of Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès even more precarious, as the move out of the lockdown looks set to drive further governability problems rather than foster a smooth power-sharing democracy. In France, the right-wing National Rally (the former National Front) has focused mainly on government failures to provide personal protective equipment and testing kits and criticized Macron's support for EU rescue measures.

The gathering push from the right raises difficult questions for democracy. The charges of executive overreach certainly have some truth to them. Yet, in stirring up bitter divisions about coronavirus health measures, the right's combative hostility to incumbents will unhelpfully politicize the process of restoring democracy. The emerging risk is that democracy debates get caught up in dangerously divisive political dynamics.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the main critical focus of those concerned with democracy has been the prospect of governments hanging on to emergency measures for self-interested political power. Yet, a very different risk is that a push for democratic restoration proceeds in a form that fuels dangerously polarizing antisystem politics.

There is a heavy dose of opportunism in the way many parties are deploying the narrative of reinstating civil liberties. Far-right parties have, in general, lost support during the pandemic. The focus on restoring democratic rights is a line these parties can use to put governments on the back foot without appearing disloyal to health policy efforts. This tactic gives them a way back into political debates, as many of their standard populist positions seemed discordant with the spirit of evidence-based, practical, and positive cooperation needed when the coronavirus first struck.

Rightist movements—both hard-right and, in some cases, more mainstream conservatives—have used clearly incompatible lines of attack. In some countries, their position is that the health situation has improved enough for governments to loosen restrictive laws. In other places, these movements mainly berate governments because the situation is still so grave. Sometimes, the same group uses both positions simultaneously—and not entirely coherently. It certainly seems counterintuitive that some of the most vociferous, even aggressive, calls for democratic rights to be restored have come from the same hard-right elements that have advanced politically illiberal agendas across Europe in recent years.

PROGRESSIVE GROUND?

In general, leftist parties have raised rights concerns but have placed greater stress on the economic aspects of the postvirus recovery. They have pressed harder for economic intervention and redistribution than for an expeditious recovery of liberal political rights. This might reflect a fair reading of today's most urgent priorities. Yet, these political choices mean that progressive forces risk ceding the narrative of democratic restoration to truculent right-wing forces. This approach risks giving the impression—whether fairly or not—that the left may be nervous about scrutiny and accountability being exerted over large economic recovery funds.

In France, the Socialist Party has criticized what it sees as Macron's disregard for judicial independence, but its main focus has been on advocating stronger economic support measures and more robust social protections for the most vulnerable. Germany's The Left party has been at the other end of the spectrum to the AfD, expressing concern that the government is moving out of the lockdown too fast and calling instead for more economic intervention and support for the hardest-hit parts of the population.

The UK Labour Party has gradually ratcheted up its criticism of the Conservative government's manifest mismanagement of the crisis but has not prioritized an attack on the highly restrictive law that has empowered executive control. Labour politicians sought to insert regular reviews of the lockdown measures into the government's coronavirus legislation while broadly supporting the legislation itself.

With the UK's coronavirus death rate alarmingly high, Labour's main focus so far has been on taking the government to task for its basic mishandling of the crisis. The party has been cautious about seeking a release from the lockdown and has called mainly for more transparency from the government. This is a somewhat understated and oblique approach to democratic restrictions.

Austria's Social Democrats have expressed concerns over the rule of law and what they see as the government's "authoritarian behavior." Yet, as with other left-of-center parties, the Social Democrats' main concern has been to push for more economic intervention and redistribution.

Dutch left-wing opposition parties, such as Green Left, the Labor Party (PvdA), and the Socialist Party, have focused primarily on job layoffs and challenged the clarity of the government's strategy to keep the virus under control. The PvdA has emphasized the importance of fully returning democratic rights but expressly has not pushed this line so hard as to destabilize rescue plans. One of the government's partners, the centrist D66 party, has stepped away from the coalition, mainly due to differences on EU questions such as the European Commission's proposed post-coronavirus recovery fund.

Again, political patterns are not completely homogeneous. In Sweden, political debates are curiously inverted. The hard-right Sweden Democrats have criticized the Social Democrat–led government for not responding with sufficient rigor to the coronavirus. The government has had to defend its reluctance to impose more restrictive measures as the country's death toll has climbed above those of Sweden's Nordic neighbors. The Danish People's Party has been cautious over the center-left government's de-escalation, taking advantage of the crisis to call for Denmark's borders to remain closed.

Meanwhile, in Poland, the leftist opposition has pressed for an easing of emergency conditions under which the hard-right Law and Justice administration sought—unsuccessfully—to hold a presidential election on May 10 and push through legislation to curb abortion and sex education. And in Greece, the leftist Syriza opposition complained that the center-right New Democracy government was too keen to "normalize a state of emergency" but has generally supported the country's relatively effective response to the coronavirus.

These examples show that left-right divides are blurred by government-opposition divides and the specific features of national contexts.

A NEW POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY

The coronavirus emergency spirit of consensus is not fracturing completely. Yet, more acute political differences and tensions are beginning to resurface. Some of these are about the timing and practical details of lifting the lockdowns, but some revolve around the recovery of democratic rights.

Opposition parties are beginning to push governments to relinquish restrictive emergency measures. This partly reflects a government-opposition divide that, to some degree, transcends political ideology, but elements of a left-right cleavage are also emerging. A difficult and uncomfortable picture seems to be developing that those taking up the cause of restoring democratic norms are far-right groups. This divide is blurred by all kinds of variations specific to each European state; yet, it looks set to feed into a reworked left-right rivalry after the pandemic.

This state of affairs could prove deeply unsettling for the prospects of a smooth return to full democratic processes across Europe. Hard-right actors' stances on restoring democracy are highly opportunistic, relatively superficial, and not completely consistent. To a lesser degree, the same features blight at least some more mainstream conservative opposition positions too.

These trends could become a grave shortcoming if mainstream and, especially, progressive political forces do not promptly make a more express effort to seize control of the democracy narrative from nefarious illiberal opportunists. This applies both to governments and to progressive forces outside executives. If mainstream governments fail to deal with the democracy-related lines of attack against them, they could let rightist populists back into the political fray.

So far, the principal concern about democracy during the coronavirus pandemic has been that European governments will be tempted to retain the extraordinary executive powers they have assumed to manage the virus. Now, a parallel issue is emerging that pulls in a very different direction: pressure to restore democracy may be propelling a predatory and polarized politics.

Charting a course between these contrasting risks will require a delicate balance. Democratic politicians will need to map a clearer strategy for how a careful democratic restoration can itself help societies responsibly manage the coronavirus's long tail of challenges.

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NOTES

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