

# Nationalist advance

Elisabeth Jeffries

European far-right parties have been making headway and could pose a risk to climate-friendly policy.

France's radical right-wing party, the National Front (Front National; FN), had little to say when storms flooded Burgundy vineyards. Yet its leader Marine Le Pen declared in her 2017 manifesto for France's presidency that her party would inscribe the promotion of its historic and cultural heritage into the country's constitution. Natural assets, such as the 'Climats de Bourgogne' vineyards near Dijon, France, which in 2015 acquired status as a UNESCO World Heritage site, barely figure in the FN's cultural register.

FN does take an official position on climate change in a response typical of radical right-wing parties grasping for power in northern Europe. Most of these nationalist and populist parties do not reject science outright. Up until now, their counterparts in the USA have been the main target of ridicule on environmental policies. Thomas Pellerin-Carlin, a research fellow at France's Institut Jacques Delors, observes, "Europeans believe the world is round. The debates are ludicrous in the United States compared to those in mainland Europe. Climate change itself is not in question here." Instead, the European far right prefer to marginalize this agenda in order to concentrate on border control and immigration.

Some of these parties are already in power or hold a significant share of parliamentary seats. Thus their views play a part in energy policy. In Austria, for example, the well-established populist Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) formed part of the government during the last decade and is once again tipped for success in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in October 2017.

A possible exception is Poland. "There is coal nationalism in this country, both within the right-wing governing Law and Order party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), and the previous main government party, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska). The way both parties see synergies between climate action and coal-based electricity generation is to develop 'clean coal', which in EU-speak means carbon capture and storage," says Pellerin-Carlin.



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The radical right in many northern European countries has expressed viewpoints on energy or climate. However, some of these opinions, particularly on renewable energy development, may well be stolen from rivals. The depth of their commitment is thus questionable.

FN remarks before the presidential election in May 2017 do not suggest France should withdraw from multilateral international agreements on climate change. Its position is nonetheless ambivalent, asserting the primacy of the nation state: "Negotiations like COP21 are just an example of discussions in which national states make commitments. Changing the energy system is a task for each country itself to control. It's up to France to take action within its own borders," says Philippe Murer, the FN energy spokesman.

On renewable energy and energy security, the party has expressed specific views. Many of these appear benign and have much in common with green or mainstream party policies. The FN prioritizes residential energy efficiency and renewable energy for energy security and job creation. In her presidential manifesto, Le Pen called for a "massive development in renewable energy networks", with a focus on

solar, biomass and biogas for greater energy independence. However, the party wants a moratorium on wind farms (described as "costly and monstrous" by its leader in March 2017) and a ban on shale gas. The FN wishes to see shorter supply chains, greater transparency in food and farming industries, and protectionist measures to safeguard renewable energy manufacturing in France. As part of its anti-globalization platform, it wants to withdraw from free trade agreements.

For energy storage, the FN suggests using surplus solar power for hydrogen production and use in fuel-cell transport networks. It would fund further pilots in this field. "In the near future, solar electricity will be by far the cheapest source of energy, so that energy losses incurred during its storage [using hydrogen] will be affordable", states Murer in an energy policy booklet<sup>1</sup>. The FN opposes the proposed closure of Fessenheim, the controversial nuclear power station in Alsace, France, and supports maintaining rather than reducing nuclear energy supply, in contrast to some political opponents.

In Germany, some of the views of the surging nationalist right-wing party are similar. But unlike its well-established neighbour in France,



Alternative for Germany (Alternative fuer Deutschland; AfD) was only founded in 2013. Originally formed to fight the Euro currency, it has more recently turned its attention to immigration. The AfD is distinct from the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), a party with associations with white nationalists who also hold seats in regional assemblies.

That is not to say it lacks an energy policy. AfD asserts that it wants to put an end to climate programmes, campaigning instead for secure, low-cost and sustainable electricity. It believes in the repeal of Germany's energy saving ordinance, renewable energy law, and the renewable energies heat act, the latter aimed at increasing the renewable contribution to heat energy to 14% by 2020. It wants an end to bioenergy subsidies and feed-in tariffs and would like to extend the life of nuclear power stations as well as introduce fracking with citizen consent.

"AfD is very pro-nuclear — as much as it can be in German context. It needs to be pragmatic and rational. These politicians have to be strong on green rhetoric. On emissions they are with coal in Germany generally. The Energiewende [transition to a low carbon, environmentally sound, reliable, and affordable energy supply] is very costly, involving rooftop PV for German homes... politically, that cost affects spending on the defence budget," says Pellerin-Carlin. According to one study<sup>2</sup>, the Energiewende

now costs every inhabitant of Germany at least €20 per month, more than twice the amount in 2000–2015.

The party could make a contribution to government decisions in a country often run by coalitions. In Germany, a leading party often has to decide who to work with to get the majority share of Bundestag (federal parliament) votes. Over the current government, Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democrat Party (Christlich-Demokratische Union; CDU) has been working in a grand and often uncomfortable coalition with the centre-left Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands; SPD). According to Robert Ladrecht, Professor of European Politics at Keele University, UK, the picture could be very different by the end of 2017.

"If the SPD says it has had enough of its 'death embrace', Merkel will have to look at smaller parties." He suggests she would have to choose between a combination of the liberal pro-business Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei; FDP) and the Greens, or alternatively FDP with AfD. Given that the Greens and FDP have different views on business, climate and emissions reduction, a coalition of CDU, FDP and AfD could ensue.

Some opinion polls indicate AfD could take 10% of the vote when federal elections take place in September 2017, increasing from the 4.7% gained in 2013. It already has representatives in 13 of the 16 German state assemblies. "AfD is Germany's new

far right.... [and] will probably make it for the first time into national parliamentary elections", says Ladrecht. AfD could thus impact on climate policy.

"For AfD the critical issue is immigration. The party would probably make it hard for Angela Merkel to still be considered the 'climate chancellor' [due to her commitments to emissions cuts and climate finance]. The ambitious aspect of the CDU would probably be compromised if the CDU, FDP and AfD combined in terms of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as fast as possible. Germany would not renounce climate policy but would not have to be a leader", says Ladrecht.

A similar pattern is visible in other countries. In Austria, the Freedom Party's main concern is immigration, and this has affected successive Austrian governments. "When those kind of parties are in government, if the outgoing government had been ambitious, usually it does not backtrack but there is a loss of ambition if the party propping up the government is a far right party", says Ladrecht. This is apparent in Denmark, where the far right Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) has been supporting the centre-right government party, the Liberal Party of Denmark (Venstre).

How credible are these parties' energy and environmental policies? Ladrecht suggests they are weak: "When you are a small party you have to focus your limited resources... AfD can put them into its manifesto but not go out on the doorstep discussing it. Their main theme is: do you want Germany to remain German?"

Most nationalist or populist radical parties aim to articulate a vision to look plausible as a party and to colour the 'populist' label with a more 'establishment' hue. This could perhaps blur the boundaries between the two in preparation for acceptable candidacy as a new government. Nowadays, most serious political parties in Northern Europe are expected to publish an environmental policy. In 2014 the FN formed a 'New Ecology Group', but by the 2017 campaign, its environmental and energy policies had receded.

Typically, nationalist political organizations do not shape their own environmental discourses but scavenge them from elsewhere. They have been classed into two categories: civic and ethnic. Civic nationalists use national identity to encourage the growth of liberty or independence and are more likely to find their values and goals compatible with those of ecologists<sup>3</sup>. Ethnic nationalists brood about their genetic and historic roots. Meanwhile, some environmentalist claims may also integrate a nationalistic or ethnic flavour<sup>4</sup>. This is more likely to be found in sub-

national scenarios containing environmental activist groups created by indigenous peoples.

Eco-nationalism has not been very evident in major European nations in the last few years; most of the nationalism has been stimulated by refugee arrivals from Syria and north Africa. But other factors explain why these parties ignore their natural heritage.

Most obvious is their perception that environmentalism originates from opposing philosophies. For instance, Karl Marx wrote of desertification caused by human exploitation of natural resources. Secondly, environmental justice arguments about the effects of pollution on the population's health and living standards have often emerged from poorer immigrant clusters. Therefore these are associated with the very people that nationalist far-right parties wish to expel or restrict.

Finally, some patriotic arguments about domestic protection have been appropriated by more conventional conservative parties, the 'blue-green' cohort often at the heart of

rural society. "Farmers support resilience against climate change and don't want to see their livelihood ruined. You could see the FN take advantage of that and appeal to it but they would not emphasize it", comments Ladrecht.

From its original core of voters, consisting mainly of right-wing males across France, the FN has extended its base among urban and low-income populations. "It picked up new voters in run-down areas and where there is anti-north-African sentiment, the 'left behind' rather than from farmers", Ladrecht says. By contrast, farmers typically support the conservative party, les Republicains, or ecology parties. For the FN and other far-right-wing parties, climate change is an uncomfortable distraction from their key message. "It's not a vote-winner for them. People for whom the environment is important enough to be in the top three to five considerations are usually centre-left and middle class. They would never vote for the extreme right", points out Pellerin-Carlin.

Meanwhile, ecofascism — the view that population control is the solution to environmental or resource problems — has been in abeyance in Europe in the last few years. Nationalist parties concentrate on their genetic heritage as a result of an anthropocentric or narcissistic worldview, narrowing their perception of their own natural resources. This has been most recently evident in Poland, where the right-wing government has endorsed further logging of a national reserve, the Bialowieza Forest. Moves further to the right, wherever they take place in Europe, are likely to exacerbate these tendencies. □

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