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THE EXTREME RIGHT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
A CULTURE OF HATE

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Elections to the European Parliament were held on 4-7 June 2009. Out of the 736 MEPs chosen, 38 (about 5 percent) could be considered members of extreme right parties. This paper deals with the hate factor – including, in some cases, antisemitism and racism – that is the characteristic message of all the extreme right manifestos, and with the reactions of leading international Jewish organizations and European Jewish communities to the election results. It also discusses the potential impact of the results on the European political structure.

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) were held in 4-7 June 2009. Out of the 736 MEPs chosen, 38 (about 5 percent) could be considered members of nationalist, Euro-skeptic, extreme right parties.¹ The results in Hungary and Austria are of particular concern. The success of Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary, which won some 15 percent of the vote (3 out of 22 Hungarian seats), and to a lesser extent, that of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which gained 12.7 percent (2 seats out of 17), overshadowed the larger picture. The achievement of the British National Party (BNP) in securing 2 MEPs went almost unnoticed outside of the United Kingdom.²

Right-wing and centrist parties won the majority of seats in the elections, while socialist parties suffered severe losses. Nevertheless, the electoral success of extreme right parties like Jobbik raises a number of questions. Does it herald a new wave of fascism in Europe, reminiscent of the dark days of the 1920s and 1930s? Is there a pan-European fascist movement which is exploiting the presently undefined European identity to try and establish itself as a legitimate political power, spreading hatred and racism and using xenophobia as its

¹ See proposed categorization in *The Times*, <http://tiny.cc/N2r3a>.

² For example, see <http://www.ejpress.org/article/37098>.

vehicle? Can these so-called extreme right parties be compared to the fascist parties of the past? And if, nevertheless, there are few similarities, are Europe and the world being challenged by a coordinated front of racists, antisemites and xenophobes? Do they share a meta-European policy?

There is no doubt that Jobbik's success is a milestone in the history of the new Hungary. Perusal of its website reveals harsh, violent language, including direct calls to break Hungary's laws and disturb the public order. Compared to other extreme right parties,³ such as the French Front National and the BNP, Jobbik not only uses more nationalist, racist and antisemitic expressions, but it is the only party that collaborates with a militia, the Hungarian Guard. Although the Guard was disbanded by court order in 2007, the party's confidence in the wake of the EP elections is so high that its leaders, among them the new MEPs, publicly announced in Budapest on 11 July 2009 the Guard's re-establishment.⁴

It is not surprising, then, that this phenomenon drew public and especially Jewish attention. Accusing Jobbik leaders of inflaming tensions in Hungary, Hungarian Jewish community leaders, backed by the European Jewish Congress (EJC), said in reference to new Jobbik MEP Krisztina Morvai, that the "situation is grave and dangerous in Hungary also because... [she] is a tutor at the Law Faculty of Eotvos Lorand University, where future judges are trained," and that Morvai's statements were "extremist and fascist."⁵ Roma community activists throughout central Europe, and particularly in Hungary, Romania and the Czech Republic, also expressed fear that nationalist and racist anti-Roma propaganda, and hence physical attacks on their people, would intensify.

Although on many issues the differences among these parties are greater than the common goals they seemingly share, examination of the platforms of some European extreme right parties, as well as commentaries on their agendas,⁶ reveals some common goals that could serve as a basis for cooperation, and even for establishing a parliamentary political group (requiring a minimum of 25 MEPs from seven countries): for example, stopping immigration and even repatriation of immigrants, and ending/reducing social allowances and welfare to immigrant families. First, the majority of their members hold extremely nationalistic views and all are for a "EU of nationalities." This means that not only do they oppose immigration from African or Muslim countries but also job migration from other EU

³ <http://tiny.cc/i2P7M>.

⁴ <http://www.jobbik.com/?p=663#more-663>.

⁵ <http://tiny.cc/tw8wP>.

⁶ For example, see: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/>.

countries to their homeland, even though this is permitted under EU regulations. Second, their agendas stress predominance of the national culture (language, religion and integration into the local culture) and reject multiculturalism. Third, some extreme right parties (in Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria, for example) show tendencies of revanchism, refusing to recognize the national borders of neighboring EU member countries, and demanding annexation of certain areas, on the grounds of historical right or blood connections to the population in those lands.

One motif all the extreme right parties have in common, however, is hate. They hate foreigners, but not always the same ones. They all hate Muslim and African migration into Europe as a whole and immigration into their own countries in particular.⁷ They hate “the other,” even if they are of “pure” European origin. Most have antisemitic policies, exploiting both “classical” antisemitism and the terminology and politics of the “new antisemitism,” namely anti-Zionism.⁸ Finally, and particularly in central Europe, hatred of the Roma is rampant and sometimes violent.

Will a political group be formed within the EP with a common agenda based on hate? Although it is too early to predict, it might be assumed that even if these parties do not establish a formal political framework, they might cooperate in ad hoc (or short-term) coalitions in order to gain publicity for their agendas. In some cases they might even find partners among the mainstream parties, which share their desire to block Turkey from joining the EU or to impose limitations on multiethnic immigration.

These movements and parties face a challenge and a dilemma – whether to inject into European forums their ideology of hate, or to tone down their rhetoric to attract more positive public opinion and adapt their political behavior so that their members appear as respectable politicians, voted by citizens of their countries in free elections, and showing a readiness to discuss difficult issues facing the European continent in an open and liberal atmosphere – however contrary this might be to their political views.

The forceful reactions of many organizations, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to Jobbik’s success exceeded those of Jewish groups to the achievement of the BNP in the UK. Seemingly, the explanation for this disparity lies in the political traditions of the United Kingdom and Hungary. The former has a long history of a democratic political system that adapts itself to the needs of the people while preserving the institutions and democratic

⁷ Some claim, however, that they do not hate Muslims as individuals, and even support the Arab/Palestinian struggle against Israel (the BNP, for instance).

⁸ Only two parties – the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) and the Danish People's Party (DF) – formally excluded anti-Jewish hatred and anti-Zionism from their political agendas.

political mechanisms of civil society, of which the Jewish community is an integral part. Hungary, on the other hand, is still feeling its way toward becoming such a society. However, since fascism and the presence of paramilitary groups are long rooted in its traditions, Jobbik combined with the Hungarian Guard could be a real threat to the stability of central Europe, as well as to the security of its minorities. While in Britain, a number of citizens approached the BNP leader forcing the termination of a press conference in London on the party's achievements, in Hungary, the Guard was publicly re-established in violation of the country's laws and in defiance of the decision of the appeals court.

Extreme right parties in the EP do not present an immediate threat to democracy in Europe. Many commentators and political observers even reject the notion that those parties are fascist, claiming that the majority should be labeled populist. Nevertheless, their agenda is based on hate, and their targets are not found in the streets of Brussels or Strasbourg but in the allies of their homelands and in the rhetoric of domestic politics. Moreover, despite the generally low voter turnout in the elections, these parties won many supporters. In the UK, for example, voters abandoned the socialist Labour Party in favor of the racist BNP, while perhaps more worrying was the fact that in countries such as Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, they gained a new electorate.