

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 10  
Issue 10 November Roundtable:  
*Multiculturalism and Integration*

---

Article 3

11-1-2010

## European Identity Struggles in the Age of Austerity

Par Engstrom  
*University of London*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [European Law Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Engstrom, Par (2010) "European Identity Struggles in the Age of Austerity," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 10, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss10/3>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

## European Identity Struggles in the Age of Austerity

### Abstract

The economic crisis has coincided with a discernible rise of right-wing populist parties in a number of European countries. This was most recently seen in elections in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Right-wing populist parties also hold parliamentary seats in Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Norway, and they have been part of coalition governments in Italy and Switzerland for some time. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, although not represented in parliament, wields considerable political influence, and may receive an additional electoral boost should Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, inherit the party leadership. True, these parties still enjoy only rather limited electoral support. But their influence is more significant than what is reflected in their parliamentary mandates, particularly in relation to ongoing struggles over "European values" and identity.

### Keywords

Human rights, Europe, Xenophobia, Immigration, Islam, Muslims, Multiculturalism, Politics

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## European identity struggles in the age of austerity

by Par Engstrom

The economic crisis has coincided with a discernible rise of right-wing populist parties in a number of European countries. This was most recently seen in elections in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Right-wing populist parties also hold parliamentary seats in Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Norway, and they have been part of coalition governments in Italy and Switzerland for some time. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, although not represented in parliament, wields considerable political influence, and may receive an additional electoral boost should Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, inherit the party leadership. True, these parties still enjoy only rather limited electoral support. But their influence is more significant than what is reflected in their parliamentary mandates, particularly in relation to ongoing struggles over "European values" and identity.

Right-wing populism in Europe has, of course, deep historical roots. There are also many differences between the various right-wing populist parties gaining ground in Europe today. However, a striking commonality of contemporary manifestations of right-wing populism lies in the way in which these parties have managed to exploit undercurrents of European Islamophobia for electoral gain. Exploiting Islamophobia has proven to be strategically more effective in contemporary European politics than more traditional forms of xenophobia. The exploitation of concerns regarding, and in some quarters the fear of, Muslim immigration is the common denominator of the most recent resurgence of right-wing populist parties across Europe.

The growing visibility of Islam in Europe and the problem of integrating the large minority of Muslim citizens have become electoral issues that reflect a deep unease about what is perceived as the changing character of European societies. Clearly, established political parties and political elites have been inept at responding to these concerns and have failed to convey to voters that they take them seriously. The traditional parties have indeed found it difficult to come up with a coherent set of integration policies. Whilst a plethora of institutions has been set up and a veritable industry of integration experts have been employed, the traditional parties have become increasingly removed from voters' concerns. Faced with the electoral challenges from right-wing populist parties, the traditional parties have moved further to the right in their attempts to sideline the far-right. As a consequence, from Denmark to France, governments have adopted increasingly restrictive and coercive immigration policies that have already started to undermine the very ("European") values that they often purport to safeguard.

The right-wing populist parties have capitalized on the ineptitude of European political elites by cobbling together a discourse that resonates with a significant strata of voters and draws on Islamophobic sentiments on the one hand and the fear of exploitation of the social welfare state on the other. In so doing, right-wing populism has been remarkably successful in appealing both to socially conservative voters and to those concerned with safeguarding what remains of European social welfare states. Right-wing populist parties have also managed to portray themselves as willing to express sentiments they claim no one else dares to express: that Muslim immigration is undermining European societies; that "Islam" is encroaching on Western values; and that the "West" must be saved. They purport to be defenders of "European values" (freedom of expression and women's rights in particular), while at the same time actively advocating for

the suppression of those values for certain sections of the citizenry and with regards to other related values (most notably freedom of religion).

Traditional defenders of values such as free speech, secularism, and women's rights have been largely ineffective in their response to right-wing populists who claim to be defending these values in debates over practical issues that most people can relate to, such as veiling in schools and the building of mosques. In part this can be explained by the general reluctance of the political left, still recovering from its earlier embrace of rather crude notions of "multiculturalism," to fully engage in the debates around "European values."

However, the current malaise also reflects the more profound reality, highlighted by the economic crisis, of the long-term and structural decline of the (Northern) European social-democratic model. The recent rise of right-wing populism in Northern Europe in particular is linked with declining support of social-democratic parties. This broader trend raises fundamental questions regarding the sustainability of welfare systems based on notions of solidarity as societies become culturally more heterogeneous, societal bonds of trust increasingly fragmented, and shared values and common visions of what constitutes a "good society" increasingly challenged. It is also connected with underlying concerns about the future in a world where the balance of power is rapidly shifting away from Europe (and the West more generally) and in which an ageing Europe is existentially threatened by more dynamic parts of the world.

Right-wing political parties have managed to capitalize on the failure of integration of recent immigrants in many European countries and the increasing visibility of "parallel societies." However, it is certainly [paradoxical](#) in a time of economic crisis and austerity that the most controversial political debates in Europe today seem to revolve around questions concerning the dress code of Muslim girls and women, and the building of minarets and mosques. Voters' discontent must be seen partly against the background of the fears of many workers whose wages are being undercut by immigrant labor, and partly against a widely shared disillusionment with traditional political elites that have largely evaded the tough question of how to respond to voters' concerns. Yet, in most of Europe, with the partial exceptions of France and Greece, political resignation reigns over the need for fiscal austerity. Instead of struggles against draconian budget cuts, Europe's "autumn of discontent" has brought heated debates over European identity and values.

---

*Par Engstrom is lecturer in human rights at the Human Rights Consortium, School of Advanced Study, University of London, and teaches at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and the Institute for the Study of the Americas. Current research interests focus on regional human rights institutions both comparatively and with a particular reference to the Inter-American Human Rights System. Further research interests include the relationship between human rights and democratization; transitional justice; the international relations of the Americas; human*

*rights, humanitarianism, and foreign policy; and theories of international relations, particularly relating to international law and institutions.* <http://sas.academia.edu/ParEngstrom/About>