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Across Europe, the far right rises

Today's Dutch elections are the latest evidence of Europeans looking right on crime and immigration.

By Peter Ford | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

PARIS - In life, Dutch populist leader Pim Fortuyn was an upstart maverick, playing on xenophobic fears no traditional politician had dared to tap.

In death, following his murder, Mr. Fortuyn drew almost the entire Dutch cabinet to his funeral, amid an outpouring of public sympathy. After parliamentary elections today, his party could hold the balance of power.

Across Europe, in a violent wake-up call to ruling elites, far-right parties beating the anti-immigrant drum have seized on people's concerns about crime and foreigners to shape a new political agenda.

And as they move Europe's political center of gravity to the right, they are prompting governments from one end of the continent to the other to toughen their stance against outsiders. Especially after Sept. 11, with security a top priority, Europe's multicultural vision of itself seems to be in doubt.

"Opinions that were seen as far-right 10 years ago are now voiced in the middle of the political spectrum," says Philipp Sonderegger, spokesman for the Austrian anti-racist group Mitmensch. Austria, where Jörg Haider's extremist Freedom Party blazed a trail into coalition government two years ago, is about to put a virtual stop to new immigration.

It was Jean-Marie Le Pen's shock success in the first round of French presidential elections this month that threw the new mood into relief. At the head of the anti-immigrant, anti-establishment National Front, Mr. Le Pen won 17 percent of the vote and the right to challenge President Jacques Chirac in a run-off election.

But resentments against foreigners have been bubbling just below the surface of European politics for several years. Yiannis Kolodas, an Athens university student, speaks for millions of Europeans when he blames immigrants for taking jobs from Greeks and making the streets of his city unsafe at night.

"I used to vote Socialist, to tell you the truth," he confides. "But now the mainstream parties just can't bring themselves to admit that immigration is the main cause of our problems." People like him, who have turned to the extreme nationalist Hellenic Front "are not Nazis or fascists," he says. "They just have problems and they think that immigration has something to do with them."

That is a message that the leaders of Europe's dominant centrist parties have been reluctant to hear, or to counter. Fortuyn and his counterparts elsewhere "articulated problems with immigration that other politicians refused to address," explains Hans Wansink, a commentator with the liberal Dutch daily De Volkskrant.

"The problem of immigration and minority criminality have been ignored for too long" and became taboo, he adds.

Traditional parties of both left and right feared that if they raised such issues they would play into the hands of extremists. But that reticence has backfired.

"Right-wing parties have a chance only when the politicians don't do enough to win over the understanding of the majority population," argues Klaus Bade, head of the Migration Research Institute at the University of Osnabruck in Germany. "This has been missing in Germany."

The German parliament passed the country's first ever legislation to regulate immigration only two months ago, although more than 7 million foreigners live in Germany. "The faster the law is instituted and the more pragmatically it is applied, the more right-wing propaganda will lose ground," predicts Dr. Bade.

Elsewhere in Europe, several governments have found themselves boxed into a corner by anti-immigrant

parties, and obliged by electoral politics to borrow aspects of their approach.

In Denmark, for example, the government depends on parliamentary support from the Danish Peoples Party. That was forthcoming only because it promised last week to tighten up its immigration policy, making it harder to claim refugee status, cutting back on financial aid to new immigrants, and denying foreigners a "green card" for seven years.

The socialist government in Greece, where migrants make up 10 percent of the population, has not gone that far. But under heavy pressure from the opposition it put an immigrant legalization drive on the back burner last December, and announced plans to tighten border controls and step up arrests of illegal immigrants.

"There is a limit to the number of migrants our country can welcome. Greece is not a free-for-all," Prime Minister Costas Simitis declared.

Spain cracks down

Spain, one of the main points of entry for illegal immigrants coming to the European Union (they cross the dangerous Straits of Gibraltar from Morocco by the thousands every year) has cracked down, too.

Though Spain's recent experience of a fascist dictatorship, under Gen. Francisco Franco, has stymied the far right, conservative Prime Minister José María Aznar says he plans to further curb immigration so as to forestall the rise of a Spanish Le Pen.

Indeed, he has stolen some of the extreme right-wing's thunder, causing a stir last month by announcing that 89 percent of those arrested and jailed in the first three months of this year were foreigners.

In France, too, after beating Mr. Le Pen in the runoff earlier this month, President Chirac directed his new government to make the fight against crime – a favorite National Front theme – its immediate top priority.

"Undeniably, a growing number of foreigners are being arrested for delinquency," says Juan Aviles, director of a Civil Guard think tank that studies xenophobia in Spain. "But the great majority of immigrants who come here are not criminals," he adds, and politicians would do better to find ways of integrating newcomers into society than stigmatizing them.

Certainly nobody believes that Europe's long southern coasts can be fully guarded against immigrants sailing by night from Morocco or Albania. Nor can the European Union's eastern border – often wooded and hard to patrol – be made impenetrable. So long as poor Africans or eastern Europeans live close to prosperous Western Europe, they will find ways to get in, says Mr. Aviles.

'Growth and prosperity'

And there are still some voices welcoming them, or at least some of them. "In the modern world, an open and tolerant society that welcomes newcomers is a condition for growth and prosperity," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said recently.

But the British government is also trying to plug holes through which would-be asylum seekers sneak into the country, even as the authorities lay new stress on integrating foreigners who have already arrived.

Under new legislation presented earlier this year, applicants for citizenship will have to take a US-style test to prove that they can master the English language and that they are familiar with British institutions and values. They will also have to swear allegiance to the Queen.

Immigrants to Germany will have to pass a similar test under the new law due to come into force this autumn. And the new Austrian "integration contract" contains more such obligations.

All non-European Union nationals who have come to Austria since 1998 will have to take (and pay for) courses in German and citizenship. If they don't attend, they will be fined or deported.

"If someone wants to live in Austria, he has to respect Austria's traditions", says Mario Stoiber, who voted for rightist candidate Jörg Haider's party at the last elections. "It's easier for them, and easier for the Austrians."

Le Pen's electoral success, and Fortuyn's predicted posthumous success on Wednesday, have forced European leaders to face up to realities they would rather have ignored.

"In too many cities across Europe, people feel alienated, either because they are an immigrant minority or because they are living alongside an immigrant minority which they identify – very often wrongly – with increased crime and social problems," European Union commissioner Chris Patten said last week.

Sense of alienation

Governments have to heal that sense of alienation, he insisted. "Many politicians have believed that we live in a post-ideological age, that we don't have to have politics with ideas or principles any more, that it's about managing consumer expectations," he said. "I think that is profoundly wrong. If you leave a vacuum, people with simple solutions to complex problems fill it."

Grasping the nettle, however, is a risky business.

British minister Peter Hain ran into criticism when he suggested last weekend that British Muslims could be isolationist, making their integration into British society difficult.

Sept. 11 factor

The question is especially sensitive in the wake of Sept. 11. With investigators uncovering alleged Al Qaeda cells in Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Holland and Britain, public suspicion of Muslims has deepened.

In Hamburg, where Mohammed Atta and some of his accomplices once lived, a new party known as the Law and Order Offensive, led by judge Ronald Schill, won nearly 20 percent of the vote last autumn.

At a party congress last weekend, Mr. Schill insisted that "we have nothing against Muslims," but he said he did "have a problem with 32,000 Muslim fanatics who live here and hate us, because they hate our way of life."

Europe's rising right

Across Europe, far-right parties have used concern over rising crime and a growing immigrant population to gather support. Voters are supporting these parties, say analysts, because centrist parties have been unwilling to address these concerns.

Austria: Freedom Party

The anti-immigrant party of Jörg Haider joined Austria's coalition government in 2000. Support has eroded from 27 percent to 16 percent.

Britain: British National Party

The BNP is small and marginal. It won 3 local government seats in municipal elections this month.

Denmark: Progress Party and People's Party.

When it was founded in 1972, the Progress Party called for all Muslims to be expelled from Denmark. The breakaway People's Party holds 22 seats in the 179-member parliament and is the country's main rightist party.

Belgium: Vlaams Blok

It favors independence for Flanders, Belgium's Dutch-speaking half, advocates an end to immigration, and promotes the expulsion of immigrants who fail to assimilate into Belgian culture.

Germany: National Democratic Party

Although the party is electorally insignificant, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has tried to ban it, contending it promotes neo-Nazi ideology.

Italy: National Alliance and Northern League.

The National Alliance is a member of the ruling coalition government. It finished third with 12 percent of the vote in last year's national elections. The Northern League recently supported legislation to deport jobless immigrants.

The Netherlands: Pim Fortuyn's List

The rightist political party whose leader was slain this month could win some 25 seats in the 150-seat parliament in today's election, according to early polls. This would make it the second-largest party in parliament. Fortuyn opposed new immigration, called Islam "backward," and advocated "zero tolerance" of

crime.

France: National Front

The party of extreme nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen, who founded it in 1972, advocates France for the French. Immigrants are often targeted and blamed for French ills, such as high unemployment and violence. It won 18 percent in the second round of the presidential elections this month.

Norway: Party of Progress

The party known for its anti-immigration views won 25 seats in the 165-seat parliament in last September's elections.

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Reuters, AP, Staff

• Special correspondents Lucian Kim in Berlin, Coral Davenport in Athens, Sara Miller in Madrid, and Sonya Lee in Vienna contributed to this report.

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