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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Moffitt, B. (2017). Liberal Illiberalism? The Reshaping of the Contemporary Populist Radical Right in Northern Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 5(4), 112-122. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.996>

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Article

# Liberal Illiberalism? The Reshaping of the Contemporary Populist Radical Right in Northern Europe

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Submitted: 21 April 2017 | Accepted: 29 September 2017 | Published: 29 December 2017

## Abstract

Populism, particularly in its radical right-wing variants, is often posited as antithetical to the principles of liberalism. Yet a number of contemporary cases of populist radical right parties from Northern Europe complicate this characterisation of populism: rather than being directly opposed to liberalism, these parties selectively reconfigure traditionally liberal defences of discriminated-against groups—such as homosexuals or women—in their own image, positing these groups as part of ‘the people’ who must be protected, and presenting themselves as defenders of liberty, free speech and ‘Enlightenment values’. This article examines this situation, and argues that that while populist radical right parties in Northern Europe may only invoke such liberal values to opportunistically attack their enemies—in many of these cases, Muslims and ‘the elite’ who allegedly are abetting the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe—this discursive shift represents a move towards a ‘liberal illiberalism’. Drawing on party manifestoes and press materials, it outlines the ways in which these actors articulate liberal illiberalism, the reasons they do so, and the ramifications of this shift.

## Keywords

free speech; gender; illiberalism; liberalism; liberty; nativism; populism; populist radical right; Scandinavia; The Netherlands

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Populism and the Remaking of (Il)Liberal Democracy in Europe”, edited by Lars Rensmann (University of Groningen, The Netherlands), Sarah de Lange (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) and Stefan Couperus (University of Groningen, The Netherlands).

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## 1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that populism is an illiberal phenomenon. While there is ongoing debate about populism’s democratic credentials (see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Panizza, 2005), most scholars would not object to characterising populism as antithetical to liberalism, whether it is right-wing, left-wing or another ideological variant of populism. Here, populism’s propensity for constructing ‘the people’ as a homogenous group, construing ‘the elite’ as a singular actor, for ignoring or suppressing difference, and in the case of right-wing populists, for actively targeting minority groups, are seen as flying in the face of liberalism’s commitment to pluralism, openness, and the protection of individual liberty.

However, recent high-profile cases of populist radical right (PRR) parties from Northern Europe complicate

this characterisation: rather than being *directly* opposed to liberalism, these parties reconfigure traditional liberal defences of discriminated-against groups in their own populist image, characterising groups such as homosexuals and women as part of ‘the people’ who require protection from ‘the elite’ and associated dangerous Others. They also invoke liberal defences of free speech, secularism and individual freedom, and thus ‘display a more ‘civic’ and liberal democratic face’ (Pels, 2011, p. 27) than older PRR parties. Against an elite that is allegedly in thrall to cultural relativism and political correctness, these populists present themselves as the true defenders of liberty and ‘Enlightenment values’.

This article examines this situation by comparatively analysing five contemporary cases of PRR parties in Northern Europe that have often utilised liberal arguments—the Party for Freedom (PVV) and Lijst Pim

Fortuyn (LPF) in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats (SD) in Sweden, the Danish People's Party (DF) in Denmark and the Progress Party (FrP in Norway)—and exploring what they reveal about the complicated relationship between populism and liberalism. It argues that these cases can be viewed as examples of 'liberal illiberalism', in which illiberal attacks on particular Others associated with 'the elite'—in many of these cases, Muslims and Islamists who are allegedly bringing about the 'Islamisation' of Europe—are couched in a liberal discourse.<sup>1</sup> To do this, it first examines the extant literature on populism's relationship with liberalism, before turning to the question of how these parties invoke liberalism in their policy platforms and public statements. Here, it examines four themes core to the strand of 'romantic liberalism' (Gustavsson, 2015) these parties draw upon: the defence of gender and sexual minorities; individual freedom; secularism; and free speech. It finds that these parties selectively invoke liberalism, utilising it less as an ideological compass than a discourse that is easily combined with a nativist ideology and populist style. It then examines the reasons why these PRR parties utilise liberal illiberalism, as well as the repercussions of doing this for the wider political landscape. With these findings in mind, it then closes by considering whether the strict binary between liberalism and populism needs reconsidering, given their intermingling is far more complicated in practice than in theory.

It should be noted that this article is directed towards and engages primarily with the literature on populism (and PRR parties) in Western Europe. While other relevant and adjacent literatures have explored similar themes, such as the tensions and challenges inherent in combining liberal values with diverse models of citizenship—see for example the literatures on civic integration (Joppke, 2005; Joppke & Morawska, 2003), contested citizenship (Koopmans, Statham, Giugni, & Passy, 2005) or multicultural citizenship (Kymlicka, 1995)—these debates are beyond the limits of the article. PRR parties are here understood via the influential definition provided by Mudde (2007), whereby this party family combines nativism, authoritarianism and populism (although as shall be argued, the populist component of the PRR party family is less a matter of ideology than a discourse or political style).

## 2. Populism versus Liberalism

Before progressing, it is worth defining the key terms being utilised in this article: populism and liberalism. Both are contested concepts—some would say they go so far as to fall into the category of being *essentially* contested concepts (Abbey, 2005; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017)—but the limited focus of this article prevents us diving too deeply into these conceptual arguments. For our purposes, populism is here understood

as 'a political style that features an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners' and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat' (Moffitt, 2016, p. 45). This is somewhat different to Mudde's (2007) influential definition of populism as a 'thin-centered ideology', reflecting the fact that populism is difficult to conceptualize and measure as a core *ideological* feature of a party family (see Aslanidis, 2016) and the approach has been refuted by the creator of the notion of 'thin-centered ideology' (Freeden, 2017). However, my chosen definition is coherent with Mudde's definition of PRR parties, acknowledging that populist *style* is a key feature of these parties' public expressions and discourse. Liberalism, meanwhile, here is understood in its ideological sense, as opposed to historical or philosophical senses, as laid out by Freedon (2005, p. 5), in which it is seen as 'an ideology that contains seven political concepts that interact at its core: liberty, rationality, individuality, progress, sociability, the general interest, and limited and accountable power' (Freedon, 2015, p. 15). In the contemporary European context, these ideological components tend to be reconfigured along a number of different subtypes of liberalism, which Gustavsson (2015) labels as reformation liberalism, enlightenment liberalism and romantic liberalism. These subtypes follow Locke, Kant or Mill in placing diversity, autonomy and self-expression as their primary values respectively.

What happens when we draw populism and liberalism together? As noted, populism is generally seen as antithetical to liberalism in the academic literature. The vociferousness of authors who make this argument varies: on one side, we have those who see populism as not only illiberal, but also as undemocratic; on the other, we have authors who see populism as illiberal, but accept its democratic credentials. In the former camp, authors such as Müller (2014, p. 484) argue that populism 'is a profoundly illiberal and, in the end, directly undemocratic understanding of representative democracy'. In the latter camp, authors generally contend that populism is 'one form of what Fareed Zakaria has recently popularized as 'illiberal democracy'' (Mudde, 2004, p. 561). Switching the order of the syntagm, Krastev has argued that populism 'capture[s] the major political trend in our world today: the rise of democratic illiberalism' (Krastev, 2007a, p. 104), and notes that 'populism is antiliberal but it is not antidemocratic' (Krastev, 2007b, p. 60).

Perhaps the most extensive exploration of populism's relationship to liberalism comes from Pappas (2014, 2016), who uses the same language as Krastev to provide and defend a minimal definition of populism as 'democratic illiberalism', arguing that this definition is useful as it 'points directly to populism's 'negative pole', namely, political liberalism...populism, in short, may be democratic, but it is not liberal' (Pappas, 2014, p. 3). Drawing on Riker (1982) and Rawls (2005), Pappas argues that liberalism and populism differ along three key lines: liberal-

<sup>1</sup> I am not the first to note this situation—others have explored this contrast, but have focused on these parties' nationalism rather than their populism (Brubaker, 2017; De Koster, Achterberg, Van der Waal, Van Bohemen, & Kemmers, 2014; Halikiopoulou, Mock, & Vasilopoulou, 2013).

ism's multiple cleavages versus populism's single cleavage between 'the people' and 'the elite'; liberalism's 'overlapping consensus' that seeks moderation versus populism's adversarial politics; and liberalism's constitutionalism versus populism's majoritarianism.<sup>2</sup> More so, Pappas (2016) argues that his definition of populism as 'democratic illiberalism' not only allows us to distinguish it from political liberalism, but also autarchy, or as he rewords it to explicitly demonstrate its difference from his own concept, 'nondemocratic illiberalism'. This clarification is useful as it demonstrates where those who see populism as both illiberal *and non-democratic* have gone wrong—they conflate it with autarchy.

Yet as useful as Pappas' populism/liberalism/autarchy typology is, there are cases that fall 'in between the cracks', rather than fitting neatly into one category. In this regard, empirical reality is never as clear-cut as theory, something that Pappas readily admits:

Some cases, to be sure, will be mixed bags, and therefore their inclusion in analysis, or exclusion from it, will be assumed by how one defines 'democracy' or 'illiberalism'. Should we, for instance, classify Hungary's Jobbik as a populist (i.e., illiberal but still democratic) party, or is it to be relegated to the category of nondemocratic parties, which fall outside our research concerns? Another example: Is the strong anti-immigration discourse of the Danish Progress Party a clear enough indication of 'illiberalism' (so that we can classify this party as populist), or is it reckoned simply as a set of ultra-conservative ideas, and policy proposals, of an otherwise perfectly liberal party? (Pappas, 2016)

It is this set of 'mixed bag' cases that are of interest to this article, which concerns itself not with the former cases (where the border between democratic/nondemocratic is in question), but rather with the latter cases, in which the liberal/illiberal distinction is unclear.

There are precedents for trying to classify these 'mixed bag' cases. The terms 'centrist populism' (Učeň, 2004) and 'new/centrist populism' (Pop-Eleches, 2010) have been used to classify parties in Eastern Europe that combine populism with otherwise relatively liberal-centrist positions, while Wolkenstein (2016, pp. 14–15) has convincingly argued that the populism of the Scottish National Party should be understood as a 'liberal populism'. The same term has also been used by Fella and Ruzza (2013, p. 42) in the context of Italy: 'while the populism of the LN could be described as of radical right

or nativist in character, that of Berlusconi might be described as closer to 'liberal populism'.

### 3. Illiberal Liberalism in Northern Europe

Yet one cannot use the same terminology—centrist or liberal populism—to describe the Northern European PRR parties explored here—the PVV, LPF, SD, DF and FrP. These parties have been chosen as they are the most prominent cases of PRR parties in Northern Europe (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Mudde, 2007, 2013) and this study follows a similar regional-based approach put forward by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015).<sup>3</sup> Each of these parties combine policies that are undeniably xenophobic and putatively anti-liberal with at times classically liberal positions in other policy areas. The former policies are well-documented in the academic literature, and thus do not require a lengthy analysis here: in addition to the anti-liberal positions lay out by Pappas above, they include racism (Widfeldt, 2015), nativism (Hellström & Hervik, 2014), xenophobia (Rydgren, 2010) and authoritarianism (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). What is of interest, however, are the latter policies, which have been less explored. The liberal themes that these parties tend to use to couch their otherwise relatively consistent illiberalism coalesce around: 1) gender and sexuality; 2) individual freedom; 3) 'Christian secularism' (Brubaker, 2017); and 4) free speech. Given that liberalism is such a broad church, these specific areas have been selected to examine as they broadly reflect the concerns of the variant of 'romantic liberalism' put forward by Gustavsson (2014, 2015)—a mode of 'hard' liberalism that sees self-expression as the primary value that justifies liberal rights rather than diversity, tolerance or autonomy—that is relatively common in the discursive and ideological platforms of many actors on the contemporary Western European (populist as well as non-populist) right. More so, these themes firmly fit into the sociocultural dimension of liberalism (rather than the socioeconomic dimension), which is focused on here due to the increasing salience of sociocultural issues for PRR parties in Western Europe (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016a). In the following section, I draw on these parties' platforms and public statements to examine each of these themes in turn. Taken together, I argue that these parties articulate a 'liberal illiberalism', whereby selective elements of liberal discourse and ideology are utilised to defend an ultimately illiberal position.

The first liberal theme invoked by Northern European PRR parties revolves around the protection of sexual mi-

<sup>2</sup> In a later article, Pappas modifies liberalism's two latter features to read 'the pursuit of political moderation, and the protection of minority rights' (Pappas, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> There is some debate about whether the FrP is a populist radical right party: Jungar & Jupskås (2014, p. 216) argue it is 'less authoritarian and more economically right-wing' than other PRR parties, and thus 'is probably best seen as a hybrid between a PRR party and a more traditional conservative party' although Jupskås (2016, p. 169) has elsewhere referred to the party as a 'radical right-wing populist party'. Here I choose to include FrP in this article, following the example set by Rydgren (2008, p. 738), who argues that despite the party's toned-down ethno-nationalism/nativism, it operates as something of a 'functional equivalent' to PRR parties, as 'earlier research indicates that they are electorally successful for approximately the same reasons and satisfy approximately the same political demand', while other influential authors often include them in their studies of similarly-named party families or groupings (e.g. Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2010; Norris, 2005).

norities and gender equality. The former has been particularly pertinent in the Netherlands, where the LPF's leader, Pim Fortuyn, was keen to promote his social liberalism with pronouncements about his homosexuality—as he once claimed to a critic who accused him of racism: 'I have nothing against Moroccans. I've been to bed with so many of them!' (in Pels, 2003, p. 42). PVV leader Geert Wilders has also been keen to paint himself as an ally of the LGBTQ community, arguing that he is fighting for 'the freedom that gay people should have—to kiss each other, to marry, to have children—[which] is exactly what Islam is fighting against' (in Lester Feder, 2016), and speaking at the 'Wake Up' LGBT Republican National Convention event in 2016, alongside Milo Yiannopoulos. The Scandinavian PRR have been less enthusiastic about LGBTQ rights: the DF are opposed to same-sex marriage; the SD does not oppose it, but also does not really support it with any vigour in its manifesto or public pronouncements; while the FrP only shifted its support behind same-sex marriage (and adoption by same-sex couples) in 2013. Nonetheless, these parties do argue against discrimination against LGBTQ people in their policy platforms, with the SD supporting legal prosecution against those who discriminate against people due to sexual orientation, and the DF explicitly targeting Islam as an enemy of the LGBTQ community, claiming that 'in recent decades, homosexuals have come under pressure from intolerant Islamic groups' and arguing that the party will 'work determinedly against oppression and discrimination against homosexuals', encouraging the police to 'take targeted action against specific groups that may exhibit despicable intolerance against homosexuals' (Dansk Folkeparti, 2009).

These parties have also positioned themselves as defenders of gender equality, although this tends to be a matter of discourse rather than policy. The Scandinavian PRR parties tend to treat gender equality as an established 'fact' in their countries, rather than a goal that still needs dedicated work to be achieved. This framing of gender equality allows these parties to appear to support gender equality and simultaneously criticise measures aimed at achieving further gender equality. In the first regard, 'conceiving equality as a matter of national pride, something already or nearly achieved, enables belittling gender discrimination and concealing power structures that cause gender inequality because they cannot possibly exist in a country that 'has gender equality'' (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2017, p. 44). This argument is particularly helped in the cases of the DF and FrP, where the PRR parties have been or are led by women, Pia Kjaersgaard and Siv Jensen. In the latter regard, it follows that if gender equality has 'been achieved', then any further work towards gender equality is akin to social engineering by 'the elite' or 'forcing' men and women to be the same, which is a form of discrimination in several of these parties' eyes. This manoeuvre is evident in the position of the DF, which states that it is 'committed to full and unreserved gender equality', but notes that 'equal-

ity should not be confused with positive discrimination' (Dansk Folkeparti, 2009), as well as the position of the SD, who see gender policies as highlighting difference rather than equality (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017). This 'equality but not positive discrimination' argument works for both the more socially conservative populist right parties (SD and DF) as well as the more neoliberal populist right parties (FrP, PVV and LPF), in that the former can oppose it on grounds of 'natural' differences between the genders in line with their conservative preference for so-called 'traditional families', and the latter can present equality policies as interfering with individual and market choice.

Where these parties truly invoke a strong defence of gender equality is when it comes to the perceived sexism and misogyny of immigrants, who are seen as not sharing the liberal gender attitudes of native Northern European citizens. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015, p. 29) argue, in the context of PRR parties, 'gender issues have become almost exclusively tied to the overarching issue of immigration or, better, integration'. For the Northern European PRR, this takes three tracks. The first is the need to defend the aforementioned hard-won achievement of gender equality from the threat of the influx of immigrants, whose presence will somehow dilute or threaten the liberal status quo: as Wilders puts it, the process of Islamisation in the Netherlands 'flushes decades of women emancipation through the toilet' (in Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 29). The second is the need to protect native-born women from the misogynistic practices of immigrants: the SD, for example, released a report in 2010 entitled 'Time to Speak Out About Rape!', in which they claimed that Sweden was undergoing a 'rape wave' due to the high levels of immigrants allowed into the country, and therefore the key way to reduce sexual assault was to limit immigration (Sverigedemokraterna, 2010). The third is to ban misogynistic cultural practices from immigrant communities, thus 'freeing' immigrant women from their 'cultural prisons': here we can think of the FrP proposing a ban on the 'burkini' and the headscarf in schools on the basis that Norwegians should not 'tolerate that girls of such a young age are systematically indoctrinated to accept that women are subordinate and can be suppressed as adults' (in Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007, p. 209). In all these cases, the allegedly cultural-relativistic 'elite' are seen as abetting the destruction of gender equality in allowing increasing immigration levels from 'unliberal' cultures. As Akkerman notes, these parties ultimately have a 'Janus-faced' approach to gender issues:

principles like gender equality and freedom of choice are emphasized in the immigration and integration domain, while almost all the parties are conservative when they address issues related to the family...[this] suggests that their commitment to liberalism is merely instrumental to an anti-Islam agenda. (Akkerman, 2015, p. 56)



In short, it seems that these parties are attempting to 'have their cake and eat it too' when it comes to gender, with liberal notions of freedom of expression and tolerance being invoked only when convenient.

The second liberal theme utilised by the Northern European PRR revolves around individual freedom and liberty. The Dutch PRR's liberalness in this regard has been particularly pronounced, with the LPF having promoted policies such as allowing euthanasia and supporting the legalisation of drugs and prostitution, and the PVV also having 'relatively libertarian views on a number of ethical issues', including 'the right to abortion, embryo selection and euthanasia' (Vossen, 2016, p. 55).<sup>4</sup> Cultural attitudes towards drugs and prostitution are stricter in Scandinavia than the Netherlands, and this is reflected in the fact that the Scandinavian PRR parties tend to have a more conservative approach to these issues. Indeed, the SD and DF have adopted a hard-line stance on drug policy, whereas there has been some debate in the FrP about drug legalisation, and there is support in the party for a more medicalised approach to drug treatment rather than criminalisation (Fremskrittspartiet, 2016). The same goes for euthanasia—while the FrP is in favour of legalised euthanasia (Fremskrittspartiet, 2015a), the DF opposes it but supports more 'end of life' solutions (Dansk Folkeparti, n.d.), while the SD has tended to avoid the issue. When it comes to prostitution, the SD and DP subscribe to the 'Nordic model' of criminalising the buying of sex, rather than the selling of it by prostitutes, whereas the FrP is against the model, arguing that it has made things more dangerous for sex workers (Tjernshaugen, 2017).

The third liberal theme invoked by the Northern European PRR is secularism, which at first glance may look peculiar, particularly in the Scandinavian context given the very high percentages of national church membership. However, as Brubaker points out, this is a selective secularism:

today, secularist rhetoric in Northern and Western Europe is directed against Muslim immigrants and their descendants, whose religiosity is seen as threatening despite the fact that Islam has little institutional power, political influence, or cultural authority in the wider society. (2017, p. 1201)

Whilst membership in the national Christian churches is seen as benign and borderline as a cultural membership rather than a strict religious affiliation (van den Breemer, Casanova, & Wyller, 2014), being a Muslim is seen as a dangerous all-encompassing identity at odds with the otherwise 'secular' society. These parties are thus advocates of what Brubaker (2016) has called 'Christian secularism', whereby Christianity—if not the church, then the broader Christian tradition—is redefined as the matrix of liberalism, secularity, gender equality, and gay rights'. PRR parties' conjoined defence of both secularism and

'Judeo-Christian culture' in this regard allows them to specifically target Islam as their enemy. For example, the DF argues that the 'State and Church should not be separated. The Danish national church is part of Danish history and culture' (in Restrup & Bech-Jessen, 2015), and defends the 'Judeo-Christian culture [that has] managed to create the freedom and tolerance that is the foundation for democracy' against 'fundamentalist religions—especially Islam' (Dansk Folkeparti, 2009). A similar position is put forth by the SD, who claim to promote religious freedom, but defend the Swedish Church and explicitly attack Islam as 'difficult to harmoniously coexist with Swedish and Western culture' (Sverigedemokraterna, 2011, p. 27). While the FrP was very critical of the Norwegian Church in the 1970s and 1980s, it has since changed its tune to one similar to the DF and SD, arguing that 'Christian culture and ethics [are the] fundamental values of the Norwegian society' (Harry, 2014, p. 165). Although church membership is far lower in the Netherlands, the PVV nonetheless takes a similar tack, defending Judeo-Christian values against the 'totalitarianism' of Islam, which is seen not a religion but allegedly a 'totalitarian ideology'—and even Pim Fortuyn, whose sexuality would seemingly put him at odds with the conservative sexual mores of the Christian Church, defended 'Judeo-Christian humanism' against Islam (Kluvelde, 2016).

The fourth liberal theme invoked by Northern European PRR parties is freedom of speech and expression. While 'the elite' and those on the left are portrayed as being in favour of political correctness and as wanting to police speech, those on the PRR portray themselves as the final defenders of free speech and artistic expression in a world gone mad. In some cases, the PRR has indeed experienced the reality of restrictions on free speech, with several of the parties having hate speech charges filed against them, but only the PVV being successfully found guilty of such charges. In 2016, Wilders was found guilty of inciting racial discrimination for calling for 'fewer Moroccans' in the Netherlands, and he portrayed this court battle as 'the trial against the freedom of speech', framing it in populist terms by stating it was 'against a politician who says what the politically correct elite does not want to hear' (Wilders, 2016). Such hate speech laws, according to Wilders, made the Netherlands 'a dictatorship', and like his forbearer, Fortuyn, he called for the laws to be abolished (van Noorloos, 2014, p. 252). The Scandinavian PRR parties have also portrayed themselves as victims of overzealous speech-policing and as defenders of free speech. The FrP claims that freedom of speech is 'amongst the most fundamental freedoms' (Fremskrittspartiet, n.d.) that human beings have, and Siv Jensen has argued that 'freedom of expression is absolute' (in Fremskrittspartiet, 2015b). The DF, meanwhile, has argued that 'freedom of expression should be as broad as possible' (in Restrup, 2015). Indeed, the path of free speech in the Netherlands is held up as a warning by some Scandinavian populists: following the

<sup>4</sup> The PVV's position on drugs has oscillated between being against legalisation and avoiding the issue altogether (Vossen, 2016, p. 49).

Muhammed cartoon controversy of 2005, then-leader of the DF, Pia Kjaersgaard, brought up the murder of Theo van Gogh and the dangers faced by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders as examples what happens when a country ‘compromises on freedom’ (Kjaersgaard, 2005). Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite their claims of being defenders of free speech, their passion for free speech depends on who is doing the speaking—Geert Wilders has repeatedly called for the Koran to be banned, while the DF recently clarified that they are ‘not freedom fundamentalists’ (in Ritzau, 2015) and wish to sanction the praising or condoning of terrorism.

Drawing the brief examination of these parties’ ostensibly liberal sociocultural policies together, it becomes clear that their usage of liberalism is far from consistent. Rather than unequivocally defending liberal values, these parties tend to selectively pick-and-choose the most appropriate and useful parts of liberalism and refashion them for their own illiberal means. This is particularly clear when it comes to their defence of gender equality and LGBTQ rights, which only seems to serve to demonise Islam, and their defence of free speech, which is targeted towards ‘the elite’. Apart from the case of the LPF (and to a lesser extent, the PVV), the lukewarm approach to individual freedoms and the convenient usage of ‘Christian secularism’ indicate that these parties’ commitment to several core components of liberalism identified by Freeden (2015)—particularly those of liberty, rationality and progress—is weak. As such, it is worth asking where indeed they fit in the wider ideological span of liberalism—if at all. Halikiopoulou et al. (2013, p. 112) argue that these parties’ liberalism is not of a Millian variety, but rather should be located within the lineage of Lockean liberalism, in that their tolerance only runs so far as to accommodate those who also tolerate others. Triadafilopoulos (2011, p. 863) goes one step further and calls their brand of liberalism ‘Schmittian liberalism’, in that they aim ‘to clarify the core values of liberal societies and use coercive state power to protect them from illiberal and putatively dangerous groups’. Yet these actors’ selective use of liberalism to serve illiberal ends should not *force us* to call them liberals—the term ‘liberal illiberalism’ is more useful in this regard in that *illiberalism* remains the subject of the paradoxical phrase, demonstrating that exclusion is ultimately the primary logic at play in these PRR parties’ ideology and discourse (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

#### 4. The Purpose and Repercussions of Liberal Illiberalism

Having examined the selective use of liberalism by Northern European PRR parties—what I have labelled here as ‘liberal illiberalism’—we can now turn to the important questions of *why* they choose to articulate a version of illiberal liberalism, and the *potential repercussions* of doing so. First: why utilise liberal illiberalism? One reason is the fact that cultural, linguistic and ideolog-

ical contexts that these parties are operating within are not vacuums—the countries of Northern Europe are celebrated for their pluralism, liberal social values and progressiveness (see, for example, Ervasti, Fridberg, Hjerm, & Ringdal, 2008; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; Weldon, 2006), and thus it is unsurprising that these parties will pull from the resources that are familiar and available to them in this context. As Halikiopoulou et al. argue, these parties are operating within a ‘civic zeitgeist’ characterised by a ‘current towards tolerance, diversity and rights’ (2013, p. 109), and ‘voters are more likely to support a radical right party if they perceive it as ‘normal’ or ‘legitimate’, which at least in part means democratic, effective and in line with baseline national values’ (2013, p. 111). Even if their values are *not* particularly ‘in line’ with these baseline national values, it is strategically wise to at least keep up appearances and couch them in such a manner. This also ties in with PRR parties’ increasing attempts to become more ‘acceptable’ and move closer to the mainstream: the biological racism of older iterations of such parties is no longer electorally successful nor even ‘acceptable’ on the fringes of mainstream party politics in Northern Europe, and as a result, these parties have also had to streamline their message, learn to sell it in a more sophisticated way, and adopt both language and positions that bring them closer to electoral success (see Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016b).

A second reason for utilising liberal illiberalism is that it presents Northern European PRR parties with an allegedly ‘honourable’ and ‘rational’ way to frame their Islamophobia. As noted, the appeal to ‘Enlightenment values’ and the cribbing of the discourse of liberalism is far more appealing to audiences in these contexts than outright xenophobia. This shift—from an *ethnocratic nationalism* which centres on a particular ethnic group to a *civic nationalism* which centres on with those with ‘shared values’ (Akkerman, 2005)—has been particularly evident in the Northern European PRR’s embrace of philosemitism (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1202). A sharp contrast to the antisemitism of their forbearers, these parties now see Jews as part of the ‘enlightened Western’ civilisation that must be defended against Islam: indeed, Wilders has gone so far as to portray Jerusalem as the ‘frontier’ for the West against Islam, arguing that ‘if Jerusalem falls into the hands of the Muslims, Athens and Rome will be next’ (2010). The argument promoted here is that ‘Western culture is essentially liberal, and liberal values can only be defended against Islam by way of a cultural war. As Islam is essentially an anti-liberal religion, in this view, it should be rejected wholesale’ (Akkerman, 2005, p. 348). This draws a clear line between those in favour of liberal values and those opposed to them—Muslims and ‘the elite’, the latter whom are not only abetting but are often seen as being in favour of the Islamisation of Europe: as Wilders argued in 2017, ‘almost all politicians of the established parties are promoting Islamization’ and that ‘the establishment, the elite such as universities, churches, unions, the media, politi-

cians put our enforced freedoms at stake' (in PVV Fractie Noord-Brabant, 2017).

There are important repercussions for this refashioning of illiberal policies in a liberal package. One is that it contributes to the debasement and 'emptying' of liberal tropes and arguments, which in turn makes it harder for those who more clearly subscribe to liberal ideology to defend their position, as it can gradually lose its credibility. In his work on comparative uses of liberalism in Europe, Freedon (2008, p. 26) shows that 'the cachet of liberalism in its thin sense as an ideology concerning liberty has made it superficially attractive to those who free-ride on its reputation. Although a thin liberalism is still an adapted one, misappropriations go beyond that'. The issue is that this 'misappropriation' still affects the reputation and perceived 'content' of liberalism, and in doing so can make it seem 'thinner' by the day. As 'there can be substantial morphological overlap between the concepts and vocabulary of populism and liberalism' (Freedon, 2008, p. 26), PRR parties are in a particularly strong position to 'thin out' liberalism in this regard—a development that should concern those who identify as liberals.

The other related core repercussion of liberal illiberalism is the above-noted 'mainstreaming' of the PRR in Northern Europe. While this article has already noted how the PRR's selective use of liberalism has brought them closer—at least in rhetoric—to their mainstream brethren, there is a perhaps another trend at play here coming from the opposite direction: the fact that the mainstream is also looking more like the populist right. There is a reason that it has become easier for PRR parties to cherry-pick liberal discourse and policies from their mainstream competitors: because many mainstream parties themselves have reconfigured liberal values and discourse in similar ways in Western and Northern Europe (see Bale, 2003; Mudde, 2013; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; van Spanje, 2010). To only draw on a few examples—when mainstream parties in France pass a ban on religious attire; when mandatory integration classes are introduced in a number of 'progressive' countries; when Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte tells immigrants to 'integrate or leave'; and when putative liberal and Christian democrats are happy to keep avowed advocates of illiberalism like Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in their European People's Party group in the EU Parliament—one should perhaps see PRR parties' adoption of liberalism not as an exception, but as a clear repercussion of the increasing bankruptcy of the way that many mainstream actors use liberalism themselves. Indeed, while Northern European PRR parties may articulate a liberal illiberalism, Adamson, Triadafilopoulos and Zolberg (2011) have argued that a number of 'non-populist' European governments are increasingly putting forward an 'illiberal liberalism'. While it is important to acknowledge that the order of the modifier and the subject matters greatly here—as noted earlier, liberal illiberalism indicates that illiberalism still reigns supreme in this conjunction, while illiberal liberalism indicates the opposite—the line where

one crosses over into the other is becoming less and less clear.

## 5. Conclusion: Can Right-Wing Populism Be Liberal?

Having examined cases of PRR parties in Northern Europe that are characterised by a paradoxical liberal illiberalism, we can now return to interrogate the taken-for-granted assumption in the literature: is populism really the opposite of liberalism? The answer: perhaps in theory, but not necessarily in practice. These 'mixed bag' cases display elements of liberalism as well as illiberalism, and we cannot conveniently ignore the fact that these parties employ *some* version of liberal discourse, if not advocate liberal policies—whether this is disingenuous or not.

However, at the same time we cannot seriously call these parties 'liberal', or even 'liberal populists'. As long as their core ideology is a form of nativism or civic nationalism that seeks to *exclude* rather than *include*, then these parties' illiberalism still remains their core ideological compass. As Müller notes, in these kinds of cases, 'liberal values essentially become *nationalist* values: they serve *only* to exclude. Liberal, ostensibly universalist rhetoric serves to extract the people from the people and, de facto, create a kind of self-labelling liberal aristocracy among the people' (Müller, 2014, p. 489). While left-wing forms of populism can make a more serious case for incorporating elements of liberalism given that their conception of 'the people' tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive, the ultimate divide between 'the people' and 'the elite' must eventually come into conflict with the liberal acknowledgement of multiple cleavages in society.

There are three important lessons here for reflecting on the relationship between liberalism and populism. The first is that it is somewhat misguided to portray populism as the *direct opposite* of liberalism—populists openly borrow, ape and utilise the language if not the policies of liberalism, and it is increasingly the case that it goes the other way as well, where putative liberals do the same with populism. If they are truly 'opposites', then it would follow that this would be either impossible or extremely difficult to do, but this is obviously not the case. The related second point is that 'ideological purists' are rare and often relegated to the electoral sidelines, and as such, it is unsurprising that PRR parties are able to mix their ideology, policy positions and discourse in a way that confounds our neat theoretical categories—in this regard, some populists are more liberal than others. Third, the evidence of how these parties reconfigure, adopt and utilise seemingly paradoxical ideological and discursive positions lends credence to the position that populism is less a world-view or ideology (even a thin one, as in the work of Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), and more a discourse (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisiannis, Kioupkiolis, & Siomos, 2017) or style (Moffitt, 2016): as Brubaker (2017, p. 1210) notes, such 'contradictions



are not surprising: bound by no stable substantive ideological or programmatic commitments, populism is distinctively and chronically eclectic, given to instrumentalizing whatever issues seem exploitable at the moment'. Today, those issues are most effectively exploited by wrapping them in a liberal package. Ultimately, Northern European PRR parties' liberalism should not be taken at face value, but rather understood as liberal illiberalism—an illiberalism that selectively utilises liberal tropes, discourse and ideology to put a more 'acceptable' face on otherwise illiberal politics.

### Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this thematic issue, whose comments and guidance helped improve this article immensely. Thanks also to the participants in Uppsala University's Department of Government workshop 'Democratic Self-Defence: Legal Restrictions or Socio-Political Integration', organized by Sofia Näsström, for their insightful remarks on an earlier draft of this article.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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