The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Europe's Nationalists Waiting in the Dark

By Boris Kagarlitsky

April 27, 2011



Finnish elections don't usually make headlines in Europe. But this spring Finnish voters managed to spoil the mood among Brussels bureaucrats and the liberal public by giving the nationalist True Finns party the third highest number of seats in parliament. The Social Democrats secured second place by a margin of only one-tenth of a percent of the vote.

This is indicative of the overall trend gaining momentum in Europe. As the financial crisis hits one country after another, voters become increasingly angry about having to make economic sacrifices. Residents of the poorest countries are unhappy with the austerity measures forced on them by the European Union as a prerequisite to receiving aid, and people in the wealthier countries do not like paying out of their national budget to help others.

Whenever free market policy fails, the only salvation offered is even higher doses of the same policy. And when the standard of living falls and domestic markets shrink, governments and central banks can find no better solution than to cut social spending, thereby lowering living standards and shrinking domestic markets still further.

That vicious cycle will continue until somebody has the courage to adopt the opposite course. But that would mean not only changing the economic ideology of one government or a group of countries, but the collapse of the entire system of current European institutions that is built upon this ideology. The need to support and maintain existing structures compels politicians of every stripe to persist in pursuing a policy that everyone, including themselves, can clearly see has already failed.

Critics of the euro have long warned that the attempt to integrate different economies under a single monetary system would not only fail to unify the people of Europe but would intensify the existing tensions between them. It has often been said the decision by most European governments to dismantle the European social model to increase competitiveness would not strengthen Europe but only spark a deep economic crisis, send domestic markets into disarray and undermine people's incentive to work and their sense of responsibility toward society.

All of those predictions came true in spades, but even now, when skepticism regarding the European project is gradually giving way to a single ideological doctrine uniting the peoples of Europe, the political class does not want to change.

Most tragically, conservatives and the parliamentary left are fully united in their stubborn desire to continue along their chosen liberal course. Practically foaming at the mouth, they passionately defend the European project without realizing that their own actions doom it to inevitable collapse. The majority of people see the experiment as a succession of hardships they are forced to endure.

As a result, they are searching for an alternative. Not finding one in the political left, they are turning to nationalist parties that promise their voters measures for combating unemployment, government regulation of the market and, most important, the willingness to challenge the ruling structures of the European Union. But along with a protectionist economic program, voters also receive the rest of the nationalists' ideological baggage that comes with it — ultraconservatism, authoritarianism and xenophobia.

The longer Europe's ruling elite persists in its flawed policies, the more devastating the eventual collapse of the entire system will be. The real question is who will come to power in their wake? For now, only the right-wing nationalists have shown that they are ready and willing.

Boris Kagarlitsky is director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/04/27/europes-nationalists-waiting-in-the-dark-a6644