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The Fuel for Neo-Nazism

Brandon M. Rubsamen

Pepperdine University, brandon.rubsamen@pepperdine.edu

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Just over a year ago, humanity passed the one-hundredth anniversary of perhaps the most notorious government regime ever to exist – the National Socialist German Workers’ “Nazi” Party. A century later, it may be easy – especially in American culture – to forget what the Nazi Party truly was and how it came to power. Although Nazis often play the cliché villain in Hollywood films, people must not forget that the Nazis were not simply heartless killing machines. In no way is this a sympathy letter to the Nazi regime, but rather a reminder that the same regime that murdered millions was also democratically elected into power by millions of others.

As far-right parties and neo-Nazi groups begin to impress upon the news cycle and even politics, that reminder remains more important than ever. How did a sane population invite a mantra of hate into their homes and elect a murderous regime into office? Today, support for the far-right and neo-Nazi groups is on the rise, as evidenced by recent polling in many European countries’ elections. This fact is quite worrisome to any individual with knowledge of recent European history. The new question becomes a lot like the old one: how can it be that sane people are ignoring the past and beginning to support neo-Nazi groups again in Europe? Through an exploratory analysis of select European countries revealing the effects of political stability in recent years, one can understand the factors that create support for far-right extremist movements.

In order to uncover the cause behind the recent rise in neo-Nazi support, it is helpful to look at the country in which it all began: Germany. A bastion of European economics and leader of the European Union, the Federal Republic of Germany has rebuilt soundly since the fall of the Third Reich. However, despite its massive growth and success domestically and internationally, many in Germany are beginning to revert to actions that most in German politics seek to forget. Hate crimes by far-right supporters reached a postwar high in 2020 (Reuters and Nasr). While one would hope that such neo-Nazi actions and support begins and ends with this cohort of criminals, it does not. Instead, far-right support has begun to infiltrate mainstream politics over the past decade or so. In Germany’s recent 2021 federal elections, the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) gained just over a tenth of the popular vote (Federal Returning Officer). In other words, nearly five million people in one of Europe’s most developed and affluent countries support a party promoting far-right extremist rhetoric mirroring that of the old Nazi Party (FRO). While this is technically less than the twelve percent it gained in the 2017 elections, this number still accounts for a significant portion of the German constituency, especially considering the party was only founded in 2013. The AfD only needs to gain a few more votes in order to become a viable competitor for a spot in one of Germany’s powerful coalitions. After only one hundred years, the ideologies that destroyed and villainized a country are beginning to make their way back to the forefront of politics. While there are

many substantial factors leading to this rise of far-right extremist support, one must first compare those to another similar country to find the root of the issue.

Like Germany, The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is famous for its economic success and wealth in Europe. Located along Germany's western border, Luxembourg shares many ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties with its much larger neighbor. In a socio-political context, however, many of the similarities end there. In terms of far-right support, Luxembourg and Germany diverge. Luxembourg does not have high levels of far-right support like its neighbor. In fact, it houses virtually none at all. By comparing these two European economic powerhouses, one can determine the rationale for neo-Nazi support in Europe.

Despite their economic similarities and cultural connections, Germany and Luxembourg have many significant differences. A glance at a map reveals the first stark difference between the countries. Luxembourg is nestled on Germany's western border between Belgium and France and is over one hundred times smaller than the federal republic. As of 2021, Luxembourg's population is 91.7% urbanized, while Germany's is only 77.5% (CIA). In other words, Luxembourgers live in a relatively small area surrounding its major cities, whereas Germans are much more geographically dispersed, with a large portion living in rural settings. Although the geography and population distributions are significant differences between the two states, these are unlikely the leading causes of far-right extremist support in Germany. Yes, it is common knowledge that rural communities tend to the conservative side of politics; however, while concentrated in Saxony and Thuringia, votes for the AfD spread from German city-centers to the countryside (FRO).

Keeping Saxony and Thuringia in mind, one can turn to socio-economic factors that may have a role in far-right support. The AfD won the majority of votes in Saxony and Thuringia – two of Germany's poorer regions (Sawe). Taking into account the nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric of the AfD, this makes sense as the lower-working class in a historically conservative region may be more likely to resonate with such arguments. However, the similarly poor regions of Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern were more likely to vote for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) – the left socialist party – over the AfD (FRO). This fact is important for two reasons. First, that the three aforementioned states differed significantly from Saxony and Thuringia in voting patterns indicates that being a member state of the historic East Germany (or the DDR) is not necessarily reflective of far-right support. This detail is crucial because it shows that former Communist occupation is not a sure indicator of far-right support. Second, it displays that wealth is likely not a strong indicator of domestic neo-Nazi support. In other words, regional economic prosperity is not a major factor in determining support for far-right extremist groups within a European country.

Aside from the domestic realm, economic prosperity is also not likely a significant contributor to extremist support on an international level. Both Germany and Luxembourg have high GDP per capita for European countries and are two of the wealthiest nations in the world. Therefore, the fact that one has high far-right support and the other virtually none cannot be attributable to national wealth. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that Portugal, a poorer European nation, has virtually no support for an extreme far-right entity in its government.

Because economics, in terms of gross domestic product, proves weakly linked to far-right support, domestic inequality may seem like a stronger factor. However, despite the conventional wisdom in this hypothesis, there is little statistical evidence to support it. The Gini Coefficient, which takes income distribution across populations, is the leading index of inequality by state. In 2013 and from 2016 to 2019, Germany actually had a lower (more equal) Gini Coefficient than Luxembourg (Eurostat, "Gini..."). The fact that the AfD was formed and entered the German government during this period, coupled with increased hate crimes, suggests that the correlation between domestic economic inequality and support for neo-Nazi groups is weak if existent at all.

Political history is an extremely complex topic that is impossible to measure or index and just as difficult to compare. Nevertheless, by breaking down the makeup of a country's political history, one can uncover qualifiable measures that can be compared against others. Germany has had an undeniably turbulent political history over the past century. After briefly becoming a democracy, the nation was quick to elect Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party into power – later spurring the Second World War. Following the Nazi defeat in 1945, Germany was split geographically and placed under the control of two vastly different regimes – that of the democratic Allied powers and the Communist Soviet Union. West Germany was placed under the Allies, who fostered a free capitalist society, while the Soviets locked down East Germany (DDR) under Communist control. Under American supervision, West Germany quickly rebounded as an economic power, while the DDR did not. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Germany reunited, and the Federal Republic of Germany absorbed the East. Following reunification, Germany proliferated as an economic superpower and is now a key leader of the European Union.

On the other hand, Luxembourg has had a relatively calm and stable past two centuries. Founded by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Luxembourg has experienced only one regime since. Now a constitutional monarchy with a figurehead king, the Grand Duchy has celebrated a relatively stable government that outlasted both world wars and remained untouched by Soviet Communism. In recent decades, Luxembourg has risen to success as the wealthiest country in

Europe per capita and a major center for financial services and European Union leadership.

On a social level, Luxembourg is also surprisingly stable. Native Luxembourgers only make up 51.1% of the country's population, while the other half is comprised of immigrants from Portugal, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and others – making Luxembourg an incredibly diverse nation (CIA). Furthermore, nearly 70% of Luxembourg's workforce comprises foreigners (Employment Agency). Despite these high levels of diversity and immigration, the Luxembourg society and government celebrate a history of cultural peace and stability. Such attitudes are rare for European states. Instead, as immigration increases, countries often see an increase in violence and nationalist anti-immigration support (Fetzer, 1, 13). This latter, more common phenomenon is the case in Germany.

Germany's experience with immigration is frankly complicated. It holds in imbalance both welcoming immigration policies and stark social discrimination. In the 1960s, Germany had a Gastarbeiter program that allowed Turkish and other foreigners to come work in Germany for a few years on a "guest-worker" basis (Prevezanos). The Gastarbeiter program was critical in Germany's postwar economic recovery; however, the foreign guest workers involved were not as celebrated on an individual basis. Instead, they were forced only to take the lowest, unskilled jobs and were often met with discrimination outside of the work zone (Hancock et al. 304-306). Since the 1960s, Germany has been a popular destination for immigrants and refugees and has received the most immigrants of any European nation for almost the past decade (Eurostat, "Immigration..."). In the past decade, many of these immigrants have come as refugees and asylum-seekers from Middle Eastern countries like Syria. Their relatively new and increased presence is what first accelerated the AfD, an anti-immigrant and anti-Islam party, into power in 2017 (BBC). Coupled with support for anti-immigration policies is a recent rise in violent xenophobic and right-wing activity over the past decade (Hancock 306-307). Essentially, unlike Luxembourg, the larger the number of immigrants, the more anti-immigrant hostility and support for far-right extremist groups.

While unfortunate, this trend – in which increased immigration and violence correlate – is not surprising. However, Luxembourg is the exception to this rule. One likely reason for this difference is held in the demographics. Germany's population is overwhelmingly ethnically German. In fact, over 88% of German society is made up of ethnic Germans, while Middle Eastern (and some European) minorities make up the rest. Compared to Luxembourg's nearly fifty-fifty split of natives versus immigrants, Germany's percentage is significant and may be the leading factor in the countries' differing approaches to immigration.

In Luxembourg, on the other hand, Fetzer (2011) proposes hypotheses as to why it is the exception. Most immigrants to Luxembourg are from other European countries that share Catholicism and Latin culture. Whereas the ethnic-German majority easily clashes with the minority Arab and Muslim influences, it is likely difficult for the more homogenous Latin Catholics (regardless of nationality) of Luxembourg's society to reach conflict. Despite its European population, Luxembourg does receive its fair share of non-European asylum seekers – a number that was comparable to Germany's in 2015 (Pew Research). Thus, despite Luxembourg's relative cultural and religious homogeneity, it does still have a non-Catholic and non-European population, which is met with little to no backlash, unlike in Germany. This difference could be due to Luxembourg's lack of a colonial past and thus a lack of "bitter feelings [because they never fought or lost to foreigners] ..." (Fetzer, 19-20). Other factors could be a "lack of problematic relations with [the Middle East or the] need for immigrant labor," sentiments which are reflected by Luxembourg's political elite (93-95). As Luxembourgish political elite Jean-Claude Reding (2008) explains it, "...Since the 1970s, there has been a very strong political consensus that holds that this immigration is necessary... [and] every time excessive nationalism has tried to rise up, ... [elites from every aspect of society] have formed a united front... against such tendencies" (qtd. in Fetzer 110). Therefore, as Germany and Luxembourg have relatively similar rates of immigration per capita but drastically different reactions to it, the research must move one step further in order to find the root cause of far-right extremist support in Europe.

Beyond those previously mentioned moot factors, political history stands out. Germany and Luxembourg both have remarkably similar economics, Gini indices, and immigration rates. The notable differences discussed so far are urbanization, former Communist occupation, domestic economics, demographic proportions, political history, and national approaches to immigration. Urbanization, Communism, and domestic economics have already been ruled out along with the three aforementioned similarities. The immigration approach is a dependent variable and can be ruled out as the root cause as well. Thus, only political history and demography remain. However, as mentioned earlier, political history is impossible to qualify and compare, while demographics seem nearly as difficult in pointing to a fundamental cause of far-right extremist support.¹ Instead, I would like to propose a new, synthesized factor as the leading cause behind support for far-right movements in Europe: political stability.

¹ While demographics (population ethnicity) could be a good independent variable—through which it is argued that highly homogenized societies are lent to nationalism and increased far-right support—too many exceptions in western Europe exist: Norway, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Portugal all have relatively homogenous societies but lack significant far-right extremist movements (BBC).

Political stability is, in many ways, just as it sounds: a stable political body. Two main factors fuel the notion of political stability: how stable a government has been over a period of time and how much of that stability the public has perceived. These two factors go hand in hand and yet remain independently significant.² The World Bank quantifies political stability through a composite index that "measures perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means," or, in other words, how likely a people perceive a government to change or fail at any given moment. TheGlobalEconomy.com takes said data from the World Bank and helps organize and visualize it. According to that data, Luxembourg has retained a relatively high political stability coefficient since 1996 (when the data starts), whereas Germany begins near the middle and decreases over that same period.³ While this is the only quantifiable data in support of a political stability argument, I assert that several other factors contribute to and complement it.

Political history is arguably the most important factor embodied within political stability. A country's history and governance absolutely affect how stable it is. The likelihood that a new nation with a turbulent history will collapse must be higher than that of a single-government regime that has been around for centuries. One need look no further than 20th century Europe for evidence of this (or the Global South for a 21st-century example). In fact, Germany and Luxembourg are perfect examples of the spectrum of political stability. As mentioned earlier, Germany has had a very turbulent history over the past century, while Luxembourg has remained highly stable (with only positive political change). Though economically and politically powerful today, Germany has only been stable since the 1990s and lacks the longevity of a genuinely stable nation like Luxembourg.

Several other minor factors also play complementary roles in political stability, many of which have already been cited (and ruled out as root causes). Economics, approaches to immigration (culture), and party-polarization all fill those complementary roles. Economic strength and political stability almost always go hand in hand.⁴ Cultures that are more diverse and accepting of different aspects of society, such as immigrants, are also less likely to find themselves in internal conflict. The higher the political stability coefficient, the better. In nearly

² For example, I would argue that the events that took place in the United States on January 6, 2021, did not in any concrete way affect the ability of the U.S. government to perform or its stability; however, the public certainly perceived a massive instability following the Capitol riots.

³ The higher the political stability coefficient, the better. In nearly every year since 1996, Luxembourg remains in the top 5 most politically stable European countries. Germany ranges from 10th to 25th place, averaging below 20th since 2006.

⁴ The United States may be a recent exception to this general truth. While economically strong domestically and abroad, the U.S. suffers from a relatively low political stability coefficient, according to the data compiled by the World Bank.

every year since 1996, Luxembourg remains in the top 5 most politically stable European countries, while Germany ranges from 10th to 25th place, averaging below 20th since 2006. Lastly, party polarization in democratic politics, which somewhat relates to the previous point, also plays a major role in the prevalence of internal conflict and perceptions of government stability. A more politically polarized country will generally find itself with more problems than a more politically homogeneous one. Such are Germany and Luxembourg. Given the above facets contributing to stability – including political history, political culture, economics, and perceptions thereof – political stability is the most plausible difference between Germany and Luxembourg that is directly related to their varying levels of support for far-right extremist movements.

To confirm this hypothesis, one can compare two different European countries. Greece has had a relatively low political stability coefficient since 1996, while Norway enjoys a high one (TheGlobalEconomy.com). Like Luxembourg, Norway has been politically stable for over the past two hundred years – even throughout the turbulent effects of globalization in the 20th century. The country also retains economic stability and has a vastly socially tolerant society, and is commonly known as one of the happiest countries on earth (CIA). Furthermore, there is no significant support for far-right or neo-Nazi groups in Norway (BBC). Instead, Norway displays a low correlation between political stability and extreme far-right support.

Greece, on the other hand, provides a strong example of political instability. Although Greece celebrates a rich and ancient history, in the modern-day, the Mediterranean nation has severely struggled. In just the past two hundred years, Greece has experienced wars, dictatorship, Nazi occupation, a military regime, and unstable democracy (CIA, Bowman, et al.). Since 2009, Greece has floundered economically due to difficulties with debt and is one of the least economically advanced countries in Europe (in terms of GDP). Greece also has had recent issues with immigration, especially from the Middle East – some of which have led to its economic and socio-political problems (CIA). Likely due to the instability outlined above, Greece recently saw support for neo-Nazi parties. The Golden Dawn was a notorious neo-Nazi organization and political party active in Greece from the late 1900s to 2020 when it was banned. Despite its expulsion from government, extreme far-right support still exists in the country, and a newer nationalist, anti-immigrant far-right political party, the Greek Solution, won 3.7% of the national vote in 2019 (BBC). As evinced by the recent political and economic turbulence, Greece exhibits a strong correlation between political instability and support for neo-Nazi movements.

Support for far-right extremist and neo-Nazi movements is a growing problem in Europe – one that is strongly correlated to political stability. Political stability is as much a phenomenon as it is a public perception and is measured and

made up of factors ranging from economic to behavioral. In the cases of Germany and Greece, their historical political instability appears to have had a substantial effect on the existence of far-right extremist movements and the return of neo-Nazi ideologies. Luxembourg and Norway, on the other hand, have had relatively strong and stable governments, economies, and societies in modern history and reflect such in their lack of support for far-right movements. Because Norway celebrates political stability and has little to no support for far-right movements while Greece has a turbulent past and support for neo-Nazi parties, the hypothesis that political instability causes support for extreme far-right movements in Europe is supported. Political stability, or lack thereof, thus holds a confirmed role in the presence of neo-Nazi movements in Germany and the peace and celebrated tolerance in Luxembourg. This conclusion should thus hold true for the rest of Europe and likely the entire world. As far-right extremist support increases in America along with the prevalence of neo-Nazism, it becomes ever more important to look inward at the political stability of our own country in order to find a solution to party polarization and the problems facing domestic politics today.

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