The rise of the far right in Sweden

TEOMAN ERTUĞRUL TULUN

2017 could be deemed a golden year for the rise of the far right in a number of European Union member countries. Anti-establishment populist movements, new formations like the alt-right, white nationalism, white supremacism, and covert or overt racist approaches overlapping with neo-Nazism have gained considerable ground in many EU countries. France, the Netherlands, Germany, and lastly Austria are all examples in this respect, with Austria's new coalition government even including the far-right Freedom Party. Another important EU member state, Sweden, is set to hold elections in September 2018. The Sweden Democrats, with roots in the white supremacist movement, have boomed in popularity with their support climbing up to 22 percent in polls last year, just 3 percent behind the leading party, the Social Democrats.

Despite the latest polls indicating that the Sweden Democrats' popularity has decreased, it is suggested that at its current level of support it could still prevent either the center-left or center-right blocs from forming a government after the next election, should they fail to reach a majority.

Sweden has long represented a kind of progressive paradise where healthcare and university tuition are free and rates of inequality are amongst the lowest in the world. Considering such accomplishments, why is Sweden experiencing a similar rise in anti-establishment nationalism (as a sub-category of the far-right) as the rest of Europe?

The Sweden Democrats' narrative is similar to the ethnic and nationalist claims of other far-right parties and movements. It stresses the importance of national identity and uses cultural themes for defending its positions. Despite disavowing its roots in the white-supremacist movement, the party's main platform is geared towards zero asylum-based immigration. In polls the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats sometimes exceeds 20 percent, meaning that one out of every five Swedish voters, under certain conditions, could consider voting for this far-right party.

Is it possible that the Scandinavian eugenics movement, which peaked before the First World War and turned into practice in the 1930s and 1940s, may have laid the groundwork for rising anti-establishment nationalism seen in Sweden? In the said period, Sweden was the only country with a "national eugenics society." More importantly, Swedish legislation on sterilization was a prime example of how eugenic theory was transformed into political action, resulting in the use of forced sterilization policies between 1934 and 1976. The first Swedish law on sterilization came into force in 1935 and was expanded in 1941.

Sterilization without consent was performed on a large scale on the mentally impaired up to the early 1950s, and the use of racial rhetoric was quite acceptable when the 1941 Sterilization Act was being discussed by the Swedish Parliament. The justice minister at that time, K. G. Westman, characterized the proposed law as "an important step in the direction of a purification of the Swedish stock, freeing it from the transmission of genetic material that would produce in future generations … individuals that are undesirable among a sound and healthy people."

Many years later, this inhumane practice was condemned by the Swedish government. In 1997, the then Swedish minister for social policy said that "what went on [was] barbaric and a national disgrace," pledging to create a law ensuring that involuntary sterilization would never again be used. Ultimately, the government not only apologized to the thousands of sterilization victims, but also announced in 1999 that it would pay up to 13,430 Swedish krona to each surviving victim of the eugenics program, which lasted 40 years. The traces of this dark past can be detected in the rising support for the far-right Sweden Democrats. Fixed ideas of the past and obsessions with a purified society are now manifested in the xenophobic and immigration-skeptic tendencies of a certain part of Swedish society and voters. Currently this limited support is not enough to allow the far-right party to form a government by itself. But there is a serious possibility that such a party, as in Austria, could become a key partner for coalition governments in the foreseeable future. EU countries, especially countries like Sweden, should very seriously consider whether this is the new European reality. If that is indeed the case, Europe should prepare itself to re-witness the horrors of the past.

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GWYNNE DYER

Space 2018: Better late than never

It's going to be a good year in space. The Indian Space Research Organization intends to send Chandrayaan-2, an uncrewed orbiter, lander and rover, to the moon in March.

In July, Japan's Hayabusa 2 spacecraft will arrive at its target, the asteroid 162173 Ryugu, in an effort to return samples of this space rock to Earth.

And in June, China will launch the first part of its mission to the 'dark side' of the Moon, Chang'e 4, which will position a communications satellite 60,000 km beyond the Moon to provide a link with Earth. That 425 kg. relay satellite will also guide the second element of the mission, a lander and rover, down to a soft landing on the far side of the Moon. One benefit of being on the far side is that the Moon blocks out stray radio signals from Earth, so the view of the radio spectrum of the universe is far better. But the Chang'e 4 lander will also carry seeds and insects to test whether plants and animals can be grown on the Moon.

The older space powers are also breaking new ground. Russia is testing a nuclear engine this year that could cut travel time to Mars from 18 months to just 6 weeks. In October the European Space Agency will launch a mission to Mercury. But the main event of the year, beyond doubt, is the planned launch of Elon Musk's Falcon Heavy vehicle from Cape Canaveral. (The launch window opens on 15 January.) "It's guaranteed to be exciting," said Musk last July. "There's a real good chance that it doesn't make it into orbit....I hope it makes it far enough from the pad that it doesn't cause pad damage. I would consider even that a win."

It almost certainly will all work eventually, but this is effectively a new design, not just an upgrade, and there are many elements in a big vehicle like Falcon Heavy that cannot be tested on the ground. The aerodynamics are different, the stresses are different, and nobody has ever launched a vehicle with 27 rockets before.

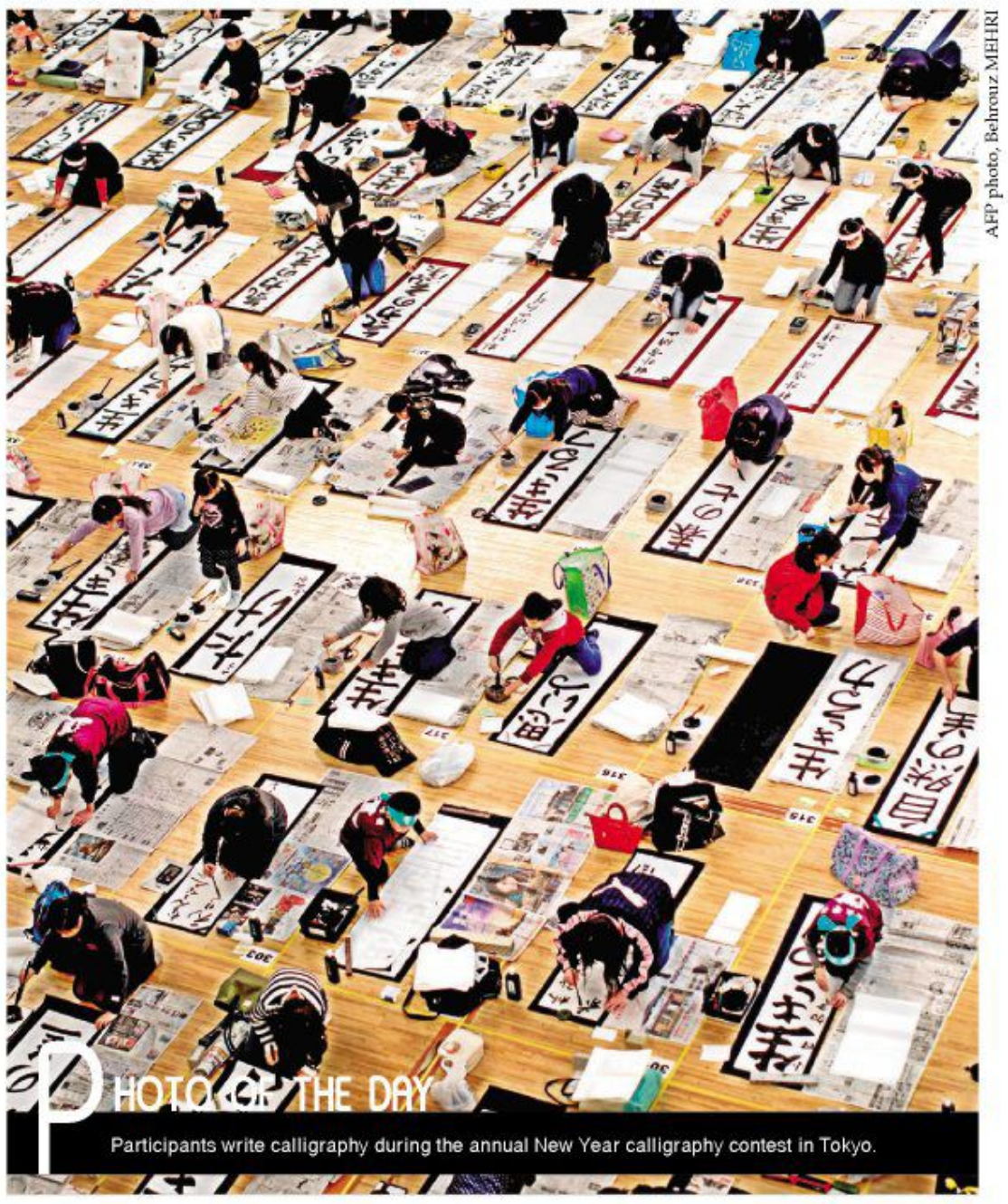
Yet Elon Musk is also one of the greatest showmen of our time, so he's an inveterate optimist. In early December he tweeted: "Payload will be my midnight cherry Tesla Roadster playing Space Oddity. Destination is Mars orbit. Will be in deep space for a billion years or so if it doesn't blow up on ascent."

It's easy to get carried away by hope, but after Falcon Heavy comes NASA's Space Launch System vehicle, which is designed to put 70 tons into Low Earth Orbit, with a follow-on version capable of 130 tons (although its rockets will not be reusable).

These are the sort of vehicles we need if we are really serious about getting out into space in a big way. When I watched the last of the Apollo Moon landings on TV in 1972, I assumed that we would be seeing rockets like this by the early 1980s.

Instead the money was cut, and then the Cold War ended. The whole enterprise was mothballed for forty years, except for unmanned interplanetary missions and a low-orbit International Space Station. But this year it does feel like we are back on track and going somewhere.

CORRECTION: A sentence in a news report titled "Gold reserves at Turkey's Central Bank hit record high" in the Jan. 5 edition of the Hürriyet Daily News was wrongly printed due to an editorial mistake. The section should have read: "Total reserves including foreign exchange and gold reached $107.7 billion in value at the end of 2017, up $1.6 billion from a year earlier." The Daily News apologizes to its readers and columnist Uğur Gürses, the original author of the report in Turkish.



AFP photo, Behrouz MEHRI

PHOTO OF THE DAY

Participants write calligraphy during the annual New Year calligraphy contest in Tokyo.

GILA BENMAYOR

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Facebook supports businesswomen

Derya Matraş has been the Turkey director of Facebook for the past two years, running the Turkey office from London. Some 44 million Turks use Facebook on a monthly basis.

Facebook now has a whopping two billion monthly users worldwide. Its global income increased 47 percent in the third quarter of 2017 from the same period the previous year.

One of the reasons for the company's snowballing success is the life philosophy of its 33-year-old founder Mark Zuckerberg, currently on parental leave following the birth of his second daughter.

"I'm going to take advantage of Facebook's option to take leave in parts. At Facebook, we offer four months of maternity and paternity leave because studies show that when working parents take time to be with their newborns, it's good for the entire family," Zuckerberg said recently. In line with this philosophy, Facebook has started to act in Turkey in support of women entrepreneurs. I recently had a chance to speak to Matraş on the subject.

"We have brought the 'SheMeansBusiness' project to Turkey in order to support women entrepreneurs," Matraş told me.

"SheMeansBusiness" is Facebook's global project, which it started nearly two years ago in Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East. In Turkey, the project has been put into practice in cooperation with the women entrepreneurs board of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), which is headed by Evrim Aras. Matraş said the project has two main legs. The first will be in the field: Educating women in major cities like Ankara, Antalya, Denizli, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Istanbul, İzmir, Kayseri, Konya and Trabzon. In this leg, women will be given education and training in marketing techniques, as well as the best ways to use platforms like Facebook and Instagram (which has 31 million users in Turkey) to develop their business. The second leg will feature success stories and role models. "We hope that the stories of women entrepreneurs that we will share on the project's website (https://shemeansbusiness.fb.com/tr/), prepared in Turkish, will inspire new success stories," said Matraş. Underlining the increasing importance of social media for business, she noted that 70 million small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) globally use Facebook pages. "We recently put into service the Turkish version of the training program 'Blueprint' for the SMEs in Turkey to grow and get easier access to global clients," Matraş said.

'Purple Certificate Program'

Meanwhile, the Purple Certificate Program, kicked off back in 2007 with the support of the Sabancı Foundation to raise awareness on gender equality among high school teachers in Turkey's various cities, is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

The program has so far reached around 3,500 teachers, one third of whom are men, according to Ayşe Gül Altınay, the director of Sabancı University's Gender and Women's Studies Research Center (SU Gender).

Altınay noted that while violence against women is on the rise according to official statistics "there is also the reality that awareness is on the rise too."

"Although male violence has been spreading, gender equality works are also spreading like a wave in deep water. You will see that in 10 years a lot will have changed," she said.

EU-GCC relations and the risk of irrelevance

SILVIA COLOMBO

While the EU has cultivated fairly structured and comprehensive relations with the western part of the Arab world since the 1990s, despite some important bilateral connections, it has not been as forthcoming when it comes to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. We can even speak of an imaginary line between, on the one hand, the southern and eastern Mediterranean, that is, the EU's strategic neighborhood, and, on the other hand, the Gulf countries including the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In recent years and months, this region has been invested by developments that have created new conditions characterized by heightened geopolitical tensions, regional competition, and even – at times – the risk of conflict spilling over the confines of the GCC or the Gulf region as a whole. In addition to the dynamics triggered by the Arab uprisings, two important factors have to be mentioned among the obstacles that have stood in the way of greater EU-GCC cooperation.

First, internal tensions among the GCC countries, particularly between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other, reached their peak in mid-2017, leaving an indelible stain on the current and future integration and cooperation prospects within the regional organization. Spurred by seemingly unbridgeable divisions over support to the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), relations to Iran and quite different foreign policy styles, the Saudi Arabia/UAE-Qatar rift not only threatens the GCC itself but also contributes to the fragmentation at the broader regional level.

Past attempts to further integrate the GCC through the "Gulf Union" initiative as a way to protect the regimes' stability are out of discussion nowadays due to the tense regional atmosphere. While protecting the stability and status quo of the ruling elites remains a key goal for all the members of the GCC, today more constraints than incentives exist for cooperation in the framework of what will likely remain a flexible and non-centralized regional organization at best. Against this backdrop, the EU has rhetorically and not so convincingly supported Kuwait's effort to mediate the crisis, while at the same time individual European countries have tended to hedge between the parties in an effort to protect their own interests and businesses.

Strongly diverging trajectories among the GCC members have also resulted from the re-emergence of Iran as a hegemonic contender at the regional level. This is the second regional factor that is currently affecting not only Gulf politics, but also the present and future of EU-GCC relations. Since July 2015, when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – also known as the Iran nuclear deal – was reached, thus setting the new pathway for re-habilitating Iran diplomatically, politically, and economically, the Gulf regional landscape has changed significantly, albeit gradually. Entered into force in January 2016, the deal represents a watershed for EU-Iran relations, the future of the MENA region and, ultimately, EU-GCC relations as well.

Important financial deals have been concluded between European companies and Iran, signaling the huge interest EU Member States hold in the Iranian market, while at the same time still being cautious due to the persistence of significant constraints to business. The predominant thinking in Brussels and in some European capitals is that Tehran is an important regional player; however, engaging with it has proved more controversial for some countries than others due to geopolitical variables.

Making sense of these two interconnected factors and of their implications for the future of EU-GCC relations unveils the extent to which the EU and the GCC have behaved more as competitors than as partners, both on a multilateral and bilateral level. New conditions, together with the persistence of mistrust, are not conducive to revamping this relationship in spite of a need for a more sustained and strategic dialogue between the two on a number of important issues. Hence, the risk of irrelevance.

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