Populism and Rising Right-Wing Nationalism in Europe

Nationalism has been a significant ideology in Europe's politics. However, in recent years, voters' interest in populist leaders and nationalist tendencies have increased even more. In its simplest understanding, nationalism is a political idea in which national integration coincides with a political one. According to Ernest Gellner, this is a feeling, rather than a strong analysis, that leads to the mobilization to recover the lost unity. In addition, nationalism is quite connected to another phenomenon namely populism which affected Western societies in the 20th century.[i] Situations such as the economic crises, the migration wave, and the Covid-19 process in recent years have led to a further increase in nationalism and populist leadership in Western societies.

Voters are fatigued with the political establishment, but they also have their worries about globalization, immigration, Covid-19, the dilution of national identity, the economic crisis, and the European Union. These concerns caused nine far-right parties to form a new bloc in the European Parliament called the Identity and Democracy (ID). Moreover, In many European countries, nationalists began to score higher in European Parliament elections and opinion polls.[ii] In many theories of nations and nationalism, the question of "where" nations are formed, exercised, and located often arises. In this context, social constructionist approaches, theories of performance, or theories of affect gain importance. Increasing nationalism in Europe is also highly related to these approaches, with the idea of preserving national land. [iii]

There are many reasons for the return to nationalism in Europe. The migration wave, which started with the "Arab Spring", especially during the "Syrian Civil War", is one of the most important reasons for the rising nationalist populism in Europe. Refugee crisis is one of the arguments most used by far-right parties in Europe. Secondly, "Euroscepticism", which perceives European Union policies as a national sovereignty issue, is also significant. The United Kingdom came out with Brexit based on this thought. One of the most important reasons is that states need to create an "other" as their enemy. Europe's current enemies, namely Islam as its external enemy, and anti-patriotic forces as its internal enemy, are viewed as elements that try to undermine Europe's national unity.[iv]

In addition to these crises, the Covid-19 process has also affected nationalist populism. Actually, there is a casual link between crises and nationalism. The insecurity and uncertainty caused by crisis bring individuals into strong rapprochement with groups. At this point, while people rely on states in threatening situations, crises increase state's priority. This bilateral orientation leads to the rise of nationalism by emphasizing the relationship between nationhood and statehood. Scholars believe that health crises such as Covid-19 - like any other crises - can create nationalist feelings in individuals and cause more harmony, or hostility, between states. Anxiety concerning death especially functions as a critical driving force of people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In times of health crises, heightened concerns about death can create different psychology and thus complicate the nationalism that results from these crises.[v]

In times of crisis, people can follow group membership and ideological validation to protect themselves against threats and anxiety. Many experts argue that the tendency for individuals to join a group is an evolutionary imperative to reduce uncertainty and the threats posed by the crisis. In other words, individuals tend to have a strong identification with groups that can reduce their anxiety. Therefore, people can demonstrate a strong national identity with their state that takes great responsibility to protect them during a crisis. This causes nationalism to rise during a crisis.[vi] At this point, it seems that the crises experienced affected the votes of the right-wing parties in Europe. According to a BBC study in 2019, nationalist parties in Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, and Belgium received more than 20% vote in European Parliament elections and opinion polls, especially on the issue of anti-immigration.[vii]

The economic impacts of neoliberal policies and globalization, advanced by national governments and the European Union, created a mass of discontented "left-behind", which become easy targets for nationalist parties. This economic disturbance and the thought of potential job and welfare loss that may occur with the migration wave further aggravate the pressure on the states. In addition, threats to national security and loss of national identity begin to be seen as a problem when immigrants are perceived as potential terrorists and criminals. This situation is exacerbated by the inability of the state to manage the economy and control national borders as a result of the EU integration process and neoliberal globalization.[viii]

The rise of nationalism and populism in Europe had very different effects. In France, Marine Le Pen's

2017 party program blamed the EU's immigration policy, claiming that it undermined the country's national sovereignty, security, identity, and economy. Matteo Salvini, leader of a far-right party in Italy, argued that the 2019 European parliamentary elections will be "a referendum between the Europe of the peoples against the Europe of the elites, banks, finance, mass immigration, and precarity." In Germany and Austria, it was seen that neo-Nazi organizations became stronger and had a serious voting potential.[ix] At this point, in 2017, the far-right "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) entered the federal parliament for the first time with a 12.6% vote, making it Germany's largest opposition party. It broke decades of anti-Nazi taboos as an anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and anti-Euro party. Germany has grown in popularity as it allows over a million undocumented immigrants. The AfD's votes did not fall, although Angela Merkel toughened her stance on immigration. It was a shock to the political establishment that this party was ahead of Merkel's party in several states in Germany.[x]

Will nationalist and especially ethnic-nationalist conflicts get worse? Many scholars argue that the possibility of nationalist conflict between the United States and China today is as strong as the nationalist conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In addition, it is argued that the pandemic period brought nationalist conflicts within the European Union to the fore.[xi] In particular, anti-immigration, Islamophobia, neo-Nazi thought increased the votes of right-wing parties and populist leaders in Europe.

However, there is also an attitude claiming that nationalist tendencies and populist leadership are unrealistic and temporary. Nationalism is not new and is deeply rooted in most societies around the world. However, nationalist policies such as stopping the migration wave to Europe and closing the borders due to the pandemic may be temporary reactions. In addition, many studies have also revealed a different situation regarding nationalism, especially during the Covid-19 period. It was also claimed that the fear of death shook ideologies rather than making people more nationalistic. For this reason, studies have concluded that voters will withdraw their support from nationalist parties in the new period.[xii]

Considering the history of democracy in Europe, multicultural prosperity, and the consequences of the Nazi era, it is viewed that a new extreme nationalism and populism in Europe cannot go forward. For this reason, many thinkers claim that today's voters' interest in right-wing parties is temporary. In addition, there are those who propose to fight this idea, especially in the case of Germany, based on the Nazi past. Many thinkers and politicians in Germany and Europe advocate the closure of far-right parties and associations and the punishment of populist leaders. In this way, they argue that they can end a disaster before it begins.[xiii]

As a result, situations such as economic crises, migration waves, anti-Islamism, and the pandemic process strengthen nationalism in Europe and increase the votes of far-right parties. It is argued that if new steps are not taken in European politics, the progress of far-right parties and populism may continue. On the contrary, according to some researchers and experts, nationalist movements and populism in Europe are temporary and unrealistic, which means various measures can be taken for this. However, only time will tell which of these views will be more realistic and permanent.

[i] Calvin Hanson, "The shadow of nationalism in the new populist proposals in Europe", The Conservation, 2019, https://theconversation.com/the-shadow-of-nationalism-in-the-new-populist-proposals-in-europe-117127.

[ii] "Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide", BBC, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006.

[iii] Peter Merriman, "National Movements: Affective Nationalism", Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space, 38(04), pp. 585-586

[iv] Calvin Hanson, "The shadow of nationalism in the new populist proposals in Europe", The Conservation, 2019, https://theconversation.com/the-shadow-of-nationalism-in-the-new-populist-proposals-in-europe-117127.

[v] Ruolin Su and Wensong Shen, "Is Nationalism Rising in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic? Individual-Level Evidence from the United States", 2021, Journal of Chinese Political Science, 26, pp. 169-172.

[vi] Ruolin Su and Wensong Shen, “Is Nationalism Rising in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic? Individual-Level Evidence from the United States”, 2021, Journal of Chinese Political Science, 26, pp. 177-179.

[vii] “Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide”, BBC, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006.

[viii] Paula Sandrin, “The rise of right-wing populism in Europe: A psychoanalytical contribution”, In B.S. Guilherme, C. Ghymers, S.G. Jones and A.R. Hoffmann, (Eds.). Financial Crisis Management and Democracy. Switzerland: Springer Press, pp. 227-231.

[ix] Paula Sandrin, “The rise of right-wing populism in Europe: A psychoanalytical contribution”, In B.S. Guilherme, C. Ghymers, S.G. Jones and A.R. Hoffmann, (Eds.). Financial Crisis Management and Democracy. Switzerland: Springer Press, pp. 237-239.

[x] “Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide”, BBC, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006.

[xi] Woods, E.T., Schertzer, R., Greenfeld, L., Hughes, C., Miller-Idriss, “COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis: A scholarly exchange”, 2020, Wiley Online Library.

[xii] Ruolin Su and Wensong Shen, “Is Nationalism Rising in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic? Individual-Level Evidence from the United States”, 2021, Journal of Chinese Political Science, 26, pp. 180-181.

[xiii] Bothsch, G., Kopke, C., Virchow, F., “Banning Extreme Right-Wing Associations in the Federal Republic of Germany”, In R. Melzer, S. Serafin, (Eds.), Right-Wing Extremisim in Europe. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013, pp. 277-280.

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