

# Kantor Program Papers

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## THE RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT IN EUROPE AND THE JEWS

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### Introduction

This paper focuses on the European radical right and their attitude to the Jewish population. The radical right should be differentiated from other trends on the far right. The radical right includes the emerging anti-immigrant populist and social movements, which are racist, sometimes antisemitic, and may have neo-Nazi origins, but which may also have rejected them. The extreme right includes neo-Nazis, neo-Nazi skinheads, autonomous nationalists and Third Positionists, the majority of whom have adopted anti-democratic and sometimes violent means to pursue their ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

### Reaching out to Jewish Communities

It may strike many as bizarre that Israel's UN ambassador Ron Prossor was pictured in November 2011 with Front National (FN) leader Marine le Pen at a reception at the French Mission in New York, in view of the multiple convictions of her father, previous FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, for inciting antisemitism.<sup>3</sup> This episode demonstrates a new approach of the French radical right – an attempt to seek Jewish support – which has been observed by experts in the field, such as Jean Yves Camus.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after that meeting, the French news channel France 24 reported that six months prior to the presidential and legislative elections, a canvasser on the outskirts of Paris was astonished to

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea Mammone, Emmanuel Godin and Brian Jenkins, eds, *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 2-5.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Tracey, "Israel Amb. 'Accidentally Meets With Le Pen'," *Tablet*, November 8, 2011, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/82744/israel-amb-%2%80%98accidentally%2%8>, downloaded February 21, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Robert Zaretsky, "France's Far-Right Front National Party is Courting Jewish Voters," *Tablet Magazine*, December 12, 2011, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/85828/send-the-marine>, downloaded February 21, 2012.

hear from a young woman wearing a Star of David necklace that she was voting for Marine le Pen.<sup>5</sup> In reaching out to the Jewish community, the FN appears to be discarding, at least outwardly, the antisemitism of its founder and former leader, and to be seeking a veneer of respectability that was glaringly absent in its past. Marine le Pen herself reinforced this change of attitude when, in contrast to her father's pronouncements, she denounced the Nazi concentration camps as "the pinnacle of barbarism."<sup>6</sup>

But it is not just the French radical right that has been courting the Jews. Leaders of the British National Party (BNP) also tried something similar. Britain's main far right group previously promoted Jewish conspiracy theories and even, on occasion, Nazi ideology. However, in a complete turnabout, BNP leader Nick Griffin, who has a criminal conviction for inciting racial hatred, stated to Israel's *Ma'ariv* newspaper that he no longer has time for "crazy antisemites."<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that in 1998, Griffin and another activist, were convicted for inciting racial hatred, and that the material in question contained Holocaust denial content. Griffin was given a nine-month suspended sentence and fined a substantial amount.<sup>8</sup>

The English Defence League (EDL), founded only in 2009, and which originally drew on football gangs for its initiatives and now includes some BNP followers, has tried to secure Jewish support for its anti-Muslim campaigns. For a short time, in addition to some Sikhs, it had a few Jewish members organized into a Jewish division (see below).<sup>9</sup>

In Belgium, leaders of the Vlaams Belang (VB) have sought to make common cause with Israel in its perceived war with radical Islam. Established in the wake of the 2004 court decision to disband the Vlaams Blok on account of its racist programs, the VB has since toned down its antisemitic rhetoric, and tried to attract Antwerp's Jewish community.<sup>10</sup> What, then, has prompted the shift of some radical rightwing groups toward seeking support from Europe's Jews, along with a more pro-Israel stance?

The two overriding political concerns of many in Europe now are immigration, particularly Muslim immigration, and economic collapse. In the minds of far right activists the two are closely

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Boitiaux, "The National Front and the Quest for the Jewish Vote," *France 24*, December 14, 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/print/5277953?print=now>, downloaded February 21, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Nadav Eyal, "I don't have time for crazy antisemites," *Maariv*, January 2, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Sentenced at Harrow Crown Court, May 1, 1998, for stirring up racial hatred in *The Rune* magazine, contrary to Section 19(1) of the Public Order Act 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Statement from the EDL English Defence League Jewish Division, February 17, 2011, <http://edl-englishdefenceleague.blogspot.com/2011/02/statement-from-the-edl-english-defence-league>, downloaded February 18, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Author's correspondence with editor of *Joods Actueel*, Antwerp, February 21, 2012. See also, for example, interview with secretary of the Antwerp Forum of Jewish Organisations, in Phillip Carmel, "Jews in Belgium Concerned That Party's Banning May Backfire," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, November 14, 2004, [http://www.jta.org/page\\_print\\_story.asp?intarticleid=14737&intcategoryid=2](http://www.jta.org/page_print_story.asp?intarticleid=14737&intcategoryid=2), downloaded November 16, 2004

linked and the rise of radical right and populist parties over the past ten years has been a consequence. While the far right once lingered on the political fringes they now command political weight in the parliaments of Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovakia and others. Opposition to immigration constitutes a principal plank in the platforms of the Sweden Democrats, the VB, the FN, the Italian Alleanza Nazionale, the Danish People's Party and the EDL.<sup>11</sup>

To varying degrees, these parties, political organizations and groups oppose ethnic and cultural diversity, and some incite public disorder with their marches and rallies aimed at harassing and intimidating Muslims and other immigrants. Their street violence provokes reactions from Muslims, especially Islamists, and an increasing spiral of action and counter-action has been evidenced in some cities.<sup>12</sup>

Five reports published recently shed some light on the issues motivating supporters of these organizations and groups. They can be summarized as: an overriding grievance over continued immigration into (primarily western) Europe, and in particular, fears over Muslim immigration; racial hatred towards minorities such as the Roma; growing dissatisfaction with governments and their inability to improve economic life; and pessimism about their countries' long-term economic prospects.<sup>13</sup>

Some radical right views may appear inconsistent when compared to the historic and traditional far right (see below). What is particularly inconsistent, as well as novel, is the positive stand that some of these groups have demonstrated towards Israel and the Jews.

According to Goodwin and Ramalingam, what differentiates the radical right from the traditional far right of the late twentieth century is the "capacity to opportunistically shift its politics and themes, increasingly spanning left-wing, and centre spectrums, and in some cases espousing the language of liberal democracy."<sup>14</sup>

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the contemporary European radical right is international in outlook, again in contrast to its twentieth century predecessors. Its members mobilize across borders, they exchange ideas and best practice, they engage with local communities and they sometimes represent those communities' real fears in an often more effective manner than traditional mainstream parties do.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Goodwin and Vidhya Ramalingam, *The New Radical Right: Violent and Non-Violent Movements in Europe*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, February 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp x-xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Goodwin, *Right Response – Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe*, Chatham House, London, 2011; Paul Jackson, *The EDL – Britain's "New Far Right" Social Movement*, Radicalism and the New Media Research Group, University of Northampton, 2011; Jamie Bartlett and Mark Littler, "Inside the EDL – Populist Politics in the Digital Age," DEMOS, London, 2011; Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell and Mark Littler, "The New Face of Digital Populism," DEMOS, London, 2011; Matthew Goodwin and Vidhya Ramalingam, *The New Radical Right: Violent and Non-Violent Movements in Europe*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Goodwin and Ramalingam, *The New Radical Right*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Whine, "Trans-European Trends in Right Wing Extremism, in Mammone et al., *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe*, pp. 323-324.

Moreover, their members are adept at using social media to amplify their message, to recruit and to organize. Some, like the EDL, are social networks rather than formal political parties, and their use of information and communications technologies facilitates growing liaison and cooperation among supporters. A recent study noted that online social media often dwarf their formal membership.<sup>16</sup> They present a more youthful profile than neo-Nazis, and their management and leadership structures are flatter and netted, rather than hierarchical, like the old far right. The new radical right molds its politics in an adaptable manner, and while it may rely on the far right tradition of street marches and demonstrations to advertise its message and attract support, it is dependent upon, and greatly empowered by its use of information and communication technologies.

According to Goodwin and Ramalingam, with an “increasingly young, charismatic, well-educated and politically-minded leadership, as well as a populist style and discourse which resonate with the wider public, the new radical right is shifting the style of successful political behaviour and political leadership in Europe, even shaping its strategies and methods of communication of mainstream parties.”<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, therefore, the new populist radical right is different from the neo-Nazi and fascist extreme right. But it should not be viewed as a uniform movement. Some groups have their origins in nationalist parties, founded by Nazi era collaborators, such as the Belgian Vlaams Blok, which preceded the Vlaams Belang, and which was a fusion of the collaborationist Vlaams National Verbond (Flemish National Union) and the Vlaamse Volkspartij (Flemish People’s Party), while others such as the EDL, the Italian Alleanza Nazionale and the Swiss Schweizer Demokraten have no Nazi or neo-Nazi foundations. Some appear to genuinely represent a growing constituency, and operate within the rules of democracy; a smaller number may have made overtures to Jewish communities.

### **Jewish Rejection**

Approaches by the EDL and BNP to British Jews were answered firmly by both secular and religious representative groups with statements rejecting their attempts to undermine social cohesion. The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews’ Congregation, the Movement for Reform Judaism, Liberal Judaism and the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues also criticized the EDL’s use of Israeli flags in their demonstrations against mosques in October 2011.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Goodwin and Ramalingam, *The New Radical Right*, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Statements made by the Board of Deputies and the synagogal bodies were made between September 21 and October 4, and were sent to the Home Secretary on October 31 by the Joseph Interfaith Organisation, London. See also: Matthew Taylor, “BNP Seeks to Bury Antisemitism and Gain Jewish votes in Islamophobic Campaign,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2008; Simon Roker, “Jews Welcome Ban on EDL Marches,” *Jewish Chronicle*, September 1, 2012, <http://www.thejc.com/print/53927>, downloaded September 1, 2012.

The EDL's approaches to British Jews appear to have been short-lived. The American Orthodox rabbi Nachum Shifren visited the EDL in England in 2010, and participated in several of their anti-Muslim rallies, as well as a pro-Israel demonstration outside the embassy in London, but members of the EDL's tiny Jewish Division now appear to have given up. Indeed a posting to the Jewish Division website notes that they have broken with the EDL and allied themselves with the American Jewish Defense League to form the Jewish Defence League UK.<sup>19</sup>

A concerted attempt to engage with British Jews as well as with Israel was made by Paul Weston, leader of the British Freedom Party, the political group with which the EDL has recently sought a liaison. In December 2010, he spoke at a Jerusalem conference of the Alliance of European Freedom and National Parties in Europe, and visited Yad Vashem.<sup>20</sup> Weston wrote in the visitors book at Yad Vashem "We will work to make sure that 'Never Again' really means never again. Signed the European Counter Jihad. 7th December 2010."<sup>21</sup> More recently, in February 2012, he spoke at a Toronto Zionist Centre meeting of the Jewish Defence League – Canada.<sup>22</sup>

Weston and his group have had no contact with official or representative Jewish or Israeli bodies, and are unlikely to have any in the future. Over the course of several months, Community Security Trust senior staff outlined the basis for the community's opposition to populist anti-Muslim campaigning.<sup>23</sup>

The BNP reacted strongly to the statement that their approach to Britain's Jewish community was motivated by a cynical desire to garner votes wherever they could, even among their traditional "enemies."

The BNP has made its position clear many times. We are not "Zionists," our overall concern is to look after the interests of our own country, and not to bother ourselves with or interfere in the affairs of other nations. But we have repeatedly denounced the neo-Nazi cranks who infest the fringes of British politics, and we reject anti-Semitism as part of a dangerous and outdated cycle of last century hostility between Jews and Gentiles – a hostility that can only benefit our mutual enemy, Islamic imperialism. Loyal British Jews are our natural allies in

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<sup>19</sup> "Rabbi Shifren Visits England and The EDL," English Defence League website, October 1, 2010, [www.englishdefenceleague.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id](http://www.englishdefenceleague.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id), downloaded October 11, 2010. The English Defence League Event @Embassy of Israel, October 24, 2010, <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=145642605479131&index=1> downloaded October 4, 2010. EDL English Defence League Jewish Division announcement, Facebook, <https://facebook.com/pages/Jewish-Defence-League-uk923:833770208343>, reposted by Simon Cressy on "Hope Not Hate" blog, January 30, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Weston, "JDL and the Victory Cake," Blogwrath.com, February 21, 2012. "Paul Weston in Israel: The West Needs to Wake Up," December 7, 2010, <http://tundratabloids.com/2010/12/paul-weston-in-israel-the-west-needs-to-wake-up.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "The European Counter-Jihad at the Yad Vashem," posted Tundra Tabloids, <http://tundratabloids.com/2010/12/the-european-counter-jihad>, December 8, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Weston, "JDL and the Victory Cake."

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Mark Gardner, "Tower Hamlets, EDL, Jews and Israel," CST blog, September 6, 2011, <http://blog.cst.org.uk/index.php?s=English+Defence+League>.

the fight against Islamic fundamentalists who want to destroy Western civilisation so many of whose core values we hold in common.<sup>24</sup>

In Belgium, despite rejection by the Jewish community bodies, the VB has consistently adopted pro-Israel positions, hosted the visit of an Israeli government minister, and even sent a delegation to Israel, with their leader, Filip De Winter being received in the Knesset, although it was a private, not an official visit. According to various reports, the Flemish population is generally more supportive of Israel's political positions than is the (French-speaking) Walloon community.<sup>25</sup> It is ironic, and perhaps a real measure of their traditional concerns, and ambivalence towards Jews, that it was the VB that initiated legislation which the Belgian Senate voted to adopt in 2011 that would have amnestied wartime Nazi collaborators. Protests against the decision were made by the Jewish community, and the initiative has not so far been enacted.<sup>26</sup>

As in the UK, Jewish communal opposition to the FN, which has a small number of prominent Jewish activists, has come from both the French religious leadership and representative bodies. In January 2012, Chief Rabbi Gilles Bernheim stated in a press interview that Jewish values were incompatible with those of the Front National, and the leadership of CRIF has spoken out against the radical right on numerous occasions, particularly after the Prossor/le Pen meeting in 2011.<sup>27</sup>

Radical right parties in central and east European countries are not inclined to seek Jewish support because they are antisemitic, and because there is little Muslim migration to their countries. Of increasing concern to the Jewish communities, however, has been the electoral success of far right and antisemitic parties, particularly in Greece and Hungary.

## **Conclusion**

The evolving ideology of the radical right is now coming to light, but attitudes towards Jews are still indistinct. In western Europe, the former narrow ultra-nationalism is moving towards a wider European cultural identity, which at the same time is fearful of economic collapse and the consequences of globalization, but especially immigration, and Muslim immigration in particular.

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<sup>24</sup> "The BNP and Anti-Semitism: A Response to the Board of Deputies," *Land & People*, April 23, 2008, <http://www.bnp.org.uk/2008/04/23/the-bnp-and-anti-semitism-a-response-to-the-board>, downloaded April 24, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Johnson, *Vlaams Belang: Friend of Israel?*, 10 November 2008, little green footballs, [http://littlegreenfootballs.com/article/31871\\_vlaams\\_Belang\\_friends-of\\_Israel](http://littlegreenfootballs.com/article/31871_vlaams_Belang_friends-of_Israel), downloaded February 21, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> The Board of Deputies of British Jews also protested to the Belgian ambassador, on May 24, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Le Grand Rabbin de France: "Les valeurs du judaïsme sont incompatibles avec celles du Front national," *SudOuest*, January 15, 2012, <http://www.sufouest.fr/2012/15/le-grand-rabbin-de=france-les-valeurs-du-judaisme>, downloaded 4 July 2012.

Free borders within the European Union and cyberspace have allowed it to absorb new ideas and operate transnationally.

The radical right has not, however, developed an empathy for Jews, nor in many cases abandoned antisemitism. Rather it sees the Jews, and Israel in particular, as natural allies in the struggle against Islam. This allows some leaders to speak out against their local Jewish communities while praising Israel. Whether this is a permanent or temporary approach remains unclear.

Jewish communities, however, have understood that undermining pluralistic and open societies may also undermine the equality and freedoms that they have achieved, and have not been afraid to say so in public.

Far right parties and groups in central and eastern Europe reflect economic concerns and loss of national powers, and focus more on historic antisemitic themes, such as the quest for world domination, and not on Muslim immigration. As a consequence, Jews are not seen as potential allies, but as 'the other', and although they are not victimized in the way that Roma and Sinti communities are, they nevertheless understand that their well-being rests on strengthening democracy not undermining it.