



## Introduction to the Special Issue: New Forms of Intolerance in European Political Life

Hara Kouki & Zsuzsanna Vidra

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## **Introduction to the Special Issue: New Forms of Intolerance in European Political Life**

HARA KOUKI

*Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute,  
San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy*

ZSUZSANNA VIDRA

*Center for Policy Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary*

*This introduction summarizes the contributions to the Special Issue that focus on the spread of intolerant and racist discourses in Denmark, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Hungary. Through a comparative approach, the issue argues that what has been decisive in this process is the role played by mainstream political parties that perceive intolerance against the “other” as the natural outcome of the failure of previous tolerant policies on immigrants and minorities. Even if brought forward with different argumentation in each case, intolerance is introduced in all five countries as a principled position under the pretext of protecting European citizens’ rights.*

**KEYWORDS** *Intolerance, racism, far-right, Europe, liberalism, civic zeitgeist, nationalist*

In recent years, politicians around Europe have proclaimed the “death of multiculturalism” and debate around the failures of the integration policies followed during the last decades. At the same time, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences continue to pose challenges to European societies. Certain minority and migrant populations, as the Muslims and the Roma, are in some cases thought to be nonintegrable in liberal democracies or even detrimental for the national and social well-being due to their cultural traditions or religious faith. And while the question of how much diversity should be tolerated is often contested in official discourses and the media, the European financial and political crisis looms large, further threatening social cohesion of the EU integration project. In the context of competition

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Address correspondence to Hara Kouki, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Via delle Fontanelle 19, San Domenico di Fiesole (Fi), 50014, Italy. E-mail: hara.kouki@eui.eu

for scarce resources, far-right-wing parties and groupings find fertile ground to raise their voice and argue that solidarity should be only toward fellow nationals. Xenophobic discourses and racist violence are gradually becoming common and far-right-wing parties are quite successful in influencing the mainstream discourse and entering national parliaments.

This Special Issue concentrates on the spread of intolerant and racist discourses by far-right-wing parties and other political and social actors in Europe and the development of local or national policies manifesting intolerance toward native minorities and immigrants. The issue brings together five case studies from countries that face this common trend of rising intolerance and racism even though they differ in their recent past and current social, political, and economic conditions—Denmark, Italy, Spain (Catalonia), Greece, and Hungary. These countries were selected on the basis of representing different institutional and political traditions, experiences of receiving migrants and minorities, and manifestations of far-right words and deeds. Moreover, in the country cases under examination, the target group of intolerance varies referring either to immigrant groups, such as settled Muslim communities (Denmark, Italy, and Spain) and newly arrived migrants (Greece, Spain) or to ethnic groups, such as the Roma in the case of Hungary. The aim of this Special Issue is to provide a mapping of the forms of intolerance that emerge at the same time around European countries with liberal, civic, or nationalist traditions of nationhood.

#### CONTEMPORARY “NEW FORMS OF INTOLERANCE”: “CIVIC ZEITGEIST” AND “LIBERAL INTOLERANCE”

The spectacular rise of far-right parties throughout Europe in the last decades has given rise to an extensive amount of literature attempting to explain their success. On the one hand, literature puts the emphasis on the so called demand side, which refers to the ways voting behavior patterns are affected by some kind of systemic crisis in post-war Europe. Focusing either on socioeconomic factors (Kitschelt, 1995) or changes in values and mentalities (Ignazi, 2003; Norris, 2005), the idea is that due to changing conditions (such as post-industrial production and processes of globalization), the continent is faced with a crisis that divides European citizens into winners and losers. This part of the population that feels and is seen as the loser or that feels threatened expresses discontent and protests by supporting authoritarian and nationalistic radical right parties (Mudde, 2010).

Literature has also focused on the behavior of far-right parties themselves—the “supply-side” approach. Institutional, political, and cultural factors in each society present political opportunity structures that extreme right parties utilize so as to mobilize and attract voters (Kriesi et al., 1995). Most recent studies show that by putting forward a moderate agenda and rejecting affiliations with fascist ideas and Nazi past, those “radical right”

parties provide a populist response to current anxieties (Hainsworth, 2008). Halikiopoulou, Mock, and Vasilopoulou (2012) actually show how some far-right parties skillfully adopt civic and liberal arguments to support ethnic exclusion and racist positions toward immigrants and minorities and thus present themselves as defenders of citizens' rights. In this way, "civic zeitgeist" is turned into an exclusivist and nationalist term: "our nation is one of tolerance, liberalism and diversity and that tradition is threatened by an influx of intolerant, reactionary and narrow-minded 'others.'" (Halikiopoulou et. al., 2012, p. 3).

At a complementary level of analysis, a number of recent works have approached the same phenomenon from a different perspective by tracing xenophobic and intolerant attitudes in mainstream public discourse and political and social actors. Vertovec and Wessendorf (2010) have recently analyzed the backlash against multiculturalism that has developed simultaneously around Europe since the early 2000s; critics toward multicultural policies, diverse though they may have been, all blamed the minorities (and/or immigrant populations) for wanting to maintain their own cultural particularities hampering, thus, coexistence. Prins (Prins, 2002, Prins & Saharso, 2010) argues that a new genre of "realism" shapes political and public discourse on Muslims in various European countries; according to this, migrant integration policies did not produce the expected results and it is about time to speak the truth about the "real" problems surrounding immigration (e.g., migrants'/minorities' alleged unwillingness to work, their low education levels, etc.), as this would be the only way to effectively deal with the issue. This new realism legitimizes intolerant and racist views in apparently politically correct terms. More recently, Mouritsen and Olsen (2013) have suggested that in some countries the discourses of far right are taking a liberal turn to become a "principled liberal intolerance," which claims that some forms of diversity are essentially illiberal and should not be tolerated; inequality and exclusion are put forward exactly in the name of liberalism: "[Intolerance] is liberal by being associated with the values of autonomy and equality, democracy, and the health and stability of liberal societies. It reverses the pragmatic of old school tolerance, insisting that too much leniency may be bad for social peace" (Mouritsen & Olsen, 2013, p. 141).

## COMPARING FORMS OF INTOLERANCE: METHODOLOGY

As a liberal value that has become a norm in contemporary societies, tolerance refers to processes during which individuals, groups, or practices that are disapproved of are allowed to exist (Dobbernack & Modood, 2013). While there has been much talk on the way tolerance is conceptualized in Europe, less attention has been paid on defining its absence or failure. Intolerance has been considered as an exception to mainstream European values and, thus, it is most often examined either as a symptom of the

crisis or related with far-right parties (Mudde, 2010). During recent years, however, the position not to tolerate groups or individuals is emerging from the mainstream political platform, reversing thus the correlation between liberalism and tolerance. As examined above, recent research has turned its attention to this mixed set of political strategies and shifts in public discourses that introduce intolerance; in rejecting the “old” type of articulate fascist ideology by using liberal and secular arguments, these “new forms of intolerance” entail and promote stigmatizing, even racist ideas about coexistence with the “other.”

By bringing forward five national case studies, this Special Issue aims at contributing toward this line of research on the new forms of emerging intolerant discourses. For this reason, while taking into account the literature on the far-right, the country analyses are not restrained to the study of far-right discourses and actions; they attempt instead to trace how these influence the mainstream political discourse and converge with wider narratives upon which modern European societies have been built, such as nationalism, liberalism, and the rule of law. By attending to processes of “mainstreaming” in five European countries, this Special Issue offers a mapping of the new forms of intolerance. The case studies that follow do not intend to account for the recent rise of intolerance across the continent, or to picture its complex facets and multiple consequences in the different countries studied. Rather, by bringing these together, the Special Issue seeks to identify a set of shared processes beyond national particularities that give shape to a European map of intolerance through which new subjectivities and collective identities are being formed.

In terms of methodology, our country studies are based on the analysis of discourses of intolerance toward cultural and religious diversity as these are expressed by far-right-wing parties and groupings and other political and civil society actors (such as NGOs and party representatives). All the articles follow a common research design: they concentrate on one or two recent conflictual events that have provoked a public debate on cultural/religious diversity in the country under study. Combining desk research with empirical fieldwork, the case studies analyze print and electronic media coverage on the selected events and qualitative semistructured interviews or discussion groups with relevant public actors that were directly or indirectly involved in the events. All studies adopt the qualitative discourse analysis approach (Wodak & Mayer, 2001; Wodak & Reisigl, 2001) in an attempt to understand how far-right discourse is perceived and narrated by individuals and mainstreamed within European liberal societies.

#### MAINSTREAMING OF INTOLERANCE: NATIONAL CASE STUDIES IN COMPARISON

The case studies selected in each country look at events that triggered public debates among the political elite, civil society, and the media on immigrant

and minority issues and the limits of tolerance to diversity. The contributions to this Special Issue trace how these debates unfolded, how certain positions became more important or even dominant, while others receded and became marginalized, and how actors defended or changed their positions. At the same time, the aim is to look also at the role and the impact of far-right parties and discourses in each debate. Departing from the methodology adopted, a common set of questions was posed in all case studies that revealed certain aspects that serve as points of comparison and structure a comprehensive mapping of intolerance in the five studied countries. While this typology refers to those specific national case studies, it is still indicative of important tendencies emerging nowadays in Europe.

Denmark is relatively untouched by the crisis but struggling with its long-term Muslim migrant integration issues. Intolerance discourses have more to do with drawing the boundaries about what is tolerable and what is nontolerable. The article focuses on two recent cases when public Muslim actors announced views that were by all means intolerant. This generated fervent debates across the political spectrum in which the so called liberal intolerant position became the dominant political stance. By referring to civic and liberal values, the boundary of tolerance was drawn excluding those who do not share those values and thus threaten social cohesion and pose security concerns. Within this rationale, Muslims were seen as a challenge to the secular divide so dear to liberal democracies. While there was an oscillation between tolerant and intolerant arguments, those debates overall marked a general shift toward liberal intolerance. Nonetheless, illiberal and racist views promoted by the far-right Danish People's Party remained marginalized from the mainstream intolerant position along with their representatives. Even if far-right views were absent, "mainstreaming" in Denmark refers to a liberal intolerant, exclusionary stance that became center stage in the Danish political life creating a new consensus.

Italy's case is similar to those of Greece and Spain because of the important economic crisis that it faces—however the rise of intolerance and xenophobia in Italy has been a long-term trend related to the rise of the Lega Nord (North League) and its relative dominance in regional and local politics in northern Italy. Regional authorities attempted through local policies to limit the socioeconomic and civil rights of immigrants provoking public debates among political actors, mainstream media, and civil society on the limits of tolerance toward the "other." It was the far-right Lega Nord that first made an anti-immigrant position its central political theme, which was, however, taken over by the center-right. Actors developed a mixed type of discourse entailing liberal, illiberal, and nationalist arguments. The far-right thematized "urban security" as threatened by the uncivic behavior of immigrants, who were called to respect and comply with Italian laws. At the same time, the emphasis put on the defense of national identity and culture and the emerging welfare chauvinism of local governments was strengthening this type of intolerance on the Italian political scene. Intolerance, thus, comprised both

liberal and nationalist aspects, and was propagated by both the far-right and the center-right. As a matter of fact, civil society strongly opposed these local policies of exclusion, restoring tolerance as the dominant political feature of the country: discriminatory local decrees and by-laws were declared as unlawful and unconstitutional by national institutions. However, the far-right and the center-right strategy of broadening the limits of intolerance still had its constitutive impact. The spread of anti-immigrant statements by a large part of the political spectrum made the public discourse on issues of diversity more intolerant and citizens more prone to embrace exclusionary views.

Greece and Spain are post-authoritarian, peripheral capitalist countries each facing an acute economic and political crisis. At the same time both countries are host to large immigrant populations—an important part of whom are or have been undocumented. The voluminous literature on the far-right, focused on the electoral success of parties in western Europe ignoring thus its trajectory in the countries of the South, which have been long considered immune to this ascendancy (Ignazi, 2003). In Spain, far-right parties have never become significant political forces. Although the far-right *Plataforma per Catalunya* is not represented in any national, regional, or local government, there has been an intolerant climate growing in Catalonia stemming from mainstream political parties. In all three case studies under scrutiny concerning undocumented immigrants, the ban on the burqa, and a hate campaign against Roma immigrants, local governments aimed at differentiating immigrants and excluding them from the political community mainly in the name of social cohesion. Such intolerance was in absolute antagonism to the political cultural of Catalonia, which is allegedly based on the civic principles of “*convivencia*” (“living together”). Catalan administration and left-wing parties framed civility as a desirable condition for the political community rather than a requirement imposed on newcomers. But other mainstream political actors, mainly right-wing ones, condemned the incivility associated with various immigrant groups. This discourse of liberal intolerance has become an important political rhetoric in Catalonia despite the lack of any influential far-right party or people’s demand for tougher immigration policy. Other forms of intolerant discourse, such as cultural racism or welfare chauvinism, remained marginal in relation to liberal intolerance.

In Greece, current developments have created what seems to be a fertile ground for the rise of xenophobia; the situation has taken much more extreme overtones than in Spain, with the abrupt rise of the far-right *Golden Dawn*, which utters purely racist ideas and conducts racist attacks in the streets of the country and managed to enter the parliament (in 2012). Such views and racist violence have become in a short period of time tolerated by the mainstream political establishment and public opinion. Departing from a series of racist attacks that took place in the center of Athens in May 2011, public and social actors who were interviewed paid lip service to liberal values, such as equality and democracy, and condemned racism. However,

the majority among them have ended up legitimating or holding intolerant positions that become dominant and cut across ideological camps. This is done through the use of nationalist argumentation that creates and maintains the boundaries between “us” (the national majority) and “them” (the immigrants/minorities). Moreover, many interviewees justified the violence against the “other” by blaming the state and state institutions. This way, they understood intolerance as a natural reaction of the ordinary people, who having been neglected by the state were seen as victims rather than perpetrators. The “mainstreaming” refers then to a process in which xenophobia, racism, and violence became gradually accepted as a normal state of affairs by citizens representing right- and center-wing mainstream parties. It was only a minority, mostly associated with the left, that still held tolerant views, arguing for cultural diversity within the nation and explaining social tensions by referring to political and social causes.

Hungary is a post-communist country with a strong far-right parliamentary party, Jobbik. It represents a very similar case to Greece except that it is a clear-cut example of the blurring the boundaries between biological and cultural racist views that became widely accepted and shared as a legitimate, moderate mainstream view. The rise of the new far-right was due to its successful tactic of rethematising the political issue of the Roma minority by reintroducing the racist term “Gypsy crime.” It successfully exploited the issue that had always been considered one of the most pressing problems of the country, evoking the most controversial sentiments. The whole political spectrum was thus pushed to react. The racist arguments of the far-right were to some extent taken over by the center-right media, but the real breakthrough in terms of mainstreaming intolerance happened when both leftist and rightist public figures and politicians started to use culturalist explanations for Roma difference. Even though not all culturalists had openly or directly exclusionary visions with regard to the Roma, accounting for difference in cultural terms did legitimate exclusion and discrimination and opened the door for more radical, biological racist ideas. Culturalists argued that Roma are inherently different, they want to be separate and live in enclaves and ghettos, thus we better let them lead the life they want. As evident through the analysis of the case study, the antiracists holding a tolerant position became a minority, while the refusal of culturalist explanations and the emphasis on human rights issues became a marginal position.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our case studies have shown that there is a convergence across Europe in terms of how intolerant positions are strengthened and oftentimes become dominant in the public sphere—also in countries where the electoral presence of far-right parties is limited, if not inexistent. Although the analyzed



national cases all have different regimes of minority accommodation and integration policies as well as diverse traditions of tolerating difference, a general backlash is at play whereby similar claims are made mainly with the aim of discrediting tolerance toward minorities and immigrants.

Accounting for the points of convergence and divergence, we can see that the position and role of the far-right in the process of mainstreaming intolerance differs in each case. In Denmark the far right party, which does hold racist and nationalist views, remained marginalized, and its views were transformed rather than mainstreamed before being adopted by other actors. In Catalonia, Spain, the situation is somehow similar inasmuch as open racism and hate speech is still considered to be unacceptable, something that is also reflected in the low electoral support of the far-right party. In Italy, Greece, and Hungary, it was clearly the far-right that set the specific anti-immigrant and antiminority overtone in the political agenda.

What emerges as decisive in accounting for the content and spread of intolerance in each country is the role played by the political mainstream, which proved also diversified. In Denmark, it was mainstream political actors who legitimized intolerance via liberal arguments creating quasi a national consensus by excluding racism and illiberal features from their discourse. A mixed type of intolerance that used liberal, illiberal, and nationalist features was found in the Italian case, where the agent of mainstreaming intolerance was the far-right and the center-right. Similarly, in Catalonia it was the mainstream right-wing parties that started to use liberal arguments along with an anti-immigrant rhetoric that empowered an intolerant understanding of citizenship. Greece and Hungary are exceptional within Europe: far-right parties need not adopt liberal argumentation or moderate their agenda but overtly propagate racist ideas and play a decisive role in politics as parliamentary actors. However, the mainstreaming of intolerance that led to their electoral rise could not have occurred if it were not for the role played by the moderate political elite. Xenophobia and racism were legitimated by mainstream parties through the use of nationalist arguments (Greece) and cultural racism (Hungary).

Significant differences notwithstanding, in all five cases there is a similarity as to how mainstream politics became more and more receptive of the ideas and rhetoric that were originally promoted by the far-right parties of each country. By attending to those processes of mainstreaming, this Special Issue presents a more complex and diverse picture of the manifestations of intolerance than the one identified in literature. As already indicated, authors argue that, in order to win political support, far-right parties have incorporated the concept of “civic values” into their rhetoric (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012); or that what we are witnessing today in Europe is the rise of an equally contradictory “principled liberal intolerance” (Mouritsen & Olsen, 2013). Valuable as these theoretical undertakings may be, they refer mostly to the geographical space of the old liberal democratic western Europe that

is allegedly shielded by civic traditions of nationhood. As such, those studies fail to account for countries with diverse citizenship traditions and models of nationhood, manifestations of far-right speech, and racist violence—and for significant differences between and within national borders. The advantage of bringing together cases from various European countries is that it accounts for diverse “intolerance regimes” emerging around the continent: the liberal intolerant type (Denmark), the racist/nationalist type (Greece, Hungary), and the mixed type utilizing liberal intolerant, nationalist, and racist elements (Italy and Spain).

Intolerance thus may take such different forms in each case—from anti-immigrant rhetoric in liberal disguise to blatant racist violence in the streets—that one would argue it could not be studied as one category of analysis. The same seems to apply though to tolerance that as a liberal value it has been accommodated in each country in equally different forms. Even if each case study should be studied in its specific sociopolitical context and in relation to past traditions, it would be misleading to treat incidents ad hoc, isolating what seems to be a common tendency beyond borders. While this Special Issue by no means compares far-right discourse and deeds or accounts for its emergence, it testifies to a similar trend that runs through the five cases as to how mainstream politics became more and more receptive to the ideas and rhetoric that were originally promoted by the far-right parties of each country. And while there are different drives behind this shift, such intolerant discourses toward diversity emerge as the “natural” outcome of a failure: the idea of tolerance toward the “other”—in its various manifestations across the countries—was proved erroneous, as critics of multiculturalism and integration policies observe (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). It is the “threatened” majorities that should now be protected against immigrants and minorities; “fuelled by anxieties over terrorism, over a lack of ‘cohesion’ and ‘political unity,’ social disorder and fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines . . . intolerance is introduced as a principled position that is necessary in order to protect the rights of individuals, and the values and the identity of the majority” (Dobbernack & Modood 2013, p. 10). The previous decades of political correctness, anti-racism, and multiculturalism have now resulted in a backlash, and intolerance is launched from mainstream actors as a result of “too much tolerance” afforded to minority groups in different form and extent in each country.

The aim of this Special Issue is to map the “new forms of intolerance” emerging around European countries with liberal, civic, or nationalist traditions of nationhood. Major differences emerge as to the form and the content of intolerance toward the “other.” Regardless of such important divergences, however, the comparative approach adopted showed that xenophobic and racist positions have spread and become an everyday phenomenon in these five countries by being embraced, tolerated, accepted, or even launched by a significant portion of the political elite and public opinion. This intolerant

unfolding of national identities has emerged not only from the far-right, but mainly from the mainstream center of European societies.

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