



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Jewish Organizations and Populist Right-Wing Parties in Europe: Engage or Ostracize?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Jewish world is divided on whether to engage or ostracize populist right-wing parties in Europe. The experience of Jews in the US and Poland suggests that a pragmatic approach would best serve the interests of both European Jews and Israel.

The surge of right-wing populism in Europe is often compared to the rise of Fascism during the 1930s. Jewish community leaders have thus rushed to attack and boycott parties such as the Front National in France, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, and the Freiheitliche Partei (FPÖ) in Austria, condemning them as political heirs to the anti-Semitic movements guilty of the Holocaust.

“Never again” commits European Jews to uphold universal human rights. This commitment makes European Jewish leaders even more hostile to right-wing xenophobia than to leftist anti-Zionism. European Jews are particularly sensitive to attacks on religious minorities, and right-wing politicians such as Marine Le Pen reinforce such fears by calling for Jewish skullcaps and ritual slaughter to be banned.

Another reason Jewish leaders refuse to engage in dialogue with populist right-wing parties is to avoid harming good relations with progressive parties and interreligious dialogue with European Muslims.

Nevertheless, the Jewish world is not united in its hostility to populist parties. Former minister Natan Sharansky and other Israeli politicians have expressed understanding for politicians opposed to liberal immigration policies. One of them – Geert Wilders, the head of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands – is considered the strongest supporter of Israel in Western Europe. Meanwhile,

right-wing governments in Hungary and Poland have earned Jewish gratitude for their voting record at the UN, though the relationship was recently marred by the controversy over Poland's new Holocaust law. In the German Bundestag, the AfD's vice-leader, Beatrix von Storch, recently distinguished herself by denouncing anti-Semitism with a candor that shamed mainstream politicians unwilling to offend Islamic sensitivities.

There is a third reason, in addition to their solidarity with Israel and opposition to the threat of Islamic anti-Semitism, that some Jews are moved to support right-wing parties: their outspoken defense of the Western Judeo-Christian heritage. This argument resonates especially strongly among European Jews for whom religious faith is a cornerstone of their identity. These Jews are ideologically close to American Jewish supporters of President Trump and the Republican Party.

Modern American history can shed light on the best course of action for European Jewish communities. Traditionally, American Jewry has been as wary of the Republican Party as contemporary European Jews are of the Front National and the AfD. The Republican Party is viewed by many American Jews as attractive to nationalists, religious fundamentalists, and hardcore conservatives, some of whom who are often anti-Semites. Yet despite these apprehensions, no major American Jewish organization has ever boycotted or issued a blanket condemnation of the Republican Party.

The wisdom of America's Jewish leaders can only be commended. Not only have Republican presidents and congressional leaders proven to be strong friends of Israel and the Jewish people, but Republican economic policies have brought unprecedented prosperity to American Jews. Jewish organizations have often criticized Republican positions on abortion, gun control, and the separation of church and state – but such criticism always takes place within a framework of dialogue and awareness-raising, not boycotts and ostracism.

There are encouraging precedents to suggest that an analogous approach could succeed in Europe. In Poland, where right-wing anti-Semitism has deep roots, the efforts of orthodox British-Israeli businessman [Jonny Daniels](#) have successfully curbed the anti-Jewish rhetoric of right-wing activists and media outlets. These grassroots achievements have been crowned by success in international diplomacy: Poland's right-wing government recently refused to vote for the UN resolution that condemned President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Jonny Daniels has been accused by some Polish Jewish leaders of selling out Jewish principles in exchange for tactical concessions by right-wing extremists. It is nevertheless undeniable that Daniels' activism has contributed to the

reduction of anti-Semitism in Poland and has highlighted the diversity of political positions embraced by the Jewish community – a diversity that counters the anti-Semitic canard that Jews are a single-minded cabal.

Yet even Jewish leaders who acknowledge the benefits of engaging populist parties know the red lines of such engagement. To begin with, a clear distinction must be made between racist right-wing parties like Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, and the NPD in Germany, and populist right-wing parties that welcome Jewish and Muslim adherents such as the Front National, the AfD and the FPÖ.

In addition, Jewish political capital needs to be invested to combat racism and xenophobia. Populist parties should not be pilloried by Jewish leaders for criticizing Islamic teachings that deserve to be criticized. However, politicians should be rebuked when they engage in blanket bigotry against European Muslims. Ahmed Aboutaleb, the mayor of Rotterdam, and Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London have both been subjected to racist smear campaigns that Jewish communities have condemned. Jewish leaders have not, however, boycotted either the Party for Freedom or UKIP, both of which tolerated these campaigns. Moral suasion via dialogue and engagement are considered more effective than boycotts.

Engagement should also be premised on political independence. When Jewish communal leaders give advice or address concerns to political parties, it should be clear that no party involved will be coopted. The worst-case scenario is one in which Jewish communities are drawn into brawls between right-wing and left-wing parties, damaging the reputation of Jews as well-integrated citizens with a plethora of views and concerns.

It is important to bear in mind that the surge of right-wing parties with an anti-Islamic and anti-immigration agenda is not a fleeting phenomenon. As the social, economic, and security costs of short-sighted immigration policies become more evident and more burdensome for Europeans, the popularity of populist parties is bound to rise. Meanwhile, their proposals will be incorporated into the platforms of mainstream European parties. Thus, though Jewish engagement of populist right-wing parties is controversial in Jewish circles today, it is unavoidable in the long run.

Jewish community leaders who respected President Obama and Pope Francis for negotiating with Ayatollah Khamenei and Raúl Castro, but who refuse to talk with populist parties in Europe, should reconsider the wisdom and consistency of their stance. Concessions to tyrants in Iran and Cuba are more likely to backfire than dialogue with the Front National, the AfD, and the FPÖ – dialogue that can push these parties to expel extremists from their ranks and

attain moral and political respectability. It is important for Jewish communities to be a voice of reason and pragmatism in European politics, which in any case is highly unlikely to repeat the mistakes and crimes of the 1930s.

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