

# THE FIGHT AGAINST TTIP

## A GREEN PYRRHIC VICTORY?

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ARTICLE BY

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Victory seems to be in sight for the movement against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). It appears to be a fairy-tale ending: a pan-European mobilisation succeeding in overcoming yet another attack by the neoliberal establishment, in the interest of the European, and indeed also the American, working people. But there is also another version of this story being told, which can't be ignored, claiming a victory for nation states against Europe, and thus giving further momentum to the already thriving nationalist tide on the continent.

**T**he feeling of victory comes after a long and intense battle, which started in 2013, when TTIP was unveiled as the resurrection of the unsuccessful Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) of the 1990s. As soon as the first details about the secret negotiations were unveiled, it became obvious that this was not about the reduction of tariffs. This was a blunt move by big industry to outmanoeuvre consumer interests, worker protection, unions, and social legislation.

It was a well-oiled machinery that sprang to life. Existing networks, from the fight against a globalisation in the sole interest of the shareholder – to the disadvantage of the working people and consumers – were completed by new transnational alliances.

Sometimes, sheer numbers hide the real amplitude and the extraordinary role of individuals in a story. But occasionally, it takes the numbers to understand the whole picture. More than 500 organisations, from small, local agricultural associations, to feminist movements, to ATTAC,

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Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth; from literally every single nation in the European Union, 3.5 million signatures, widespread coverage in all the major newspapers and TV stations: it is impossible not to wonder if Jürgen Habermas's dream of a common European public sphere has not already come true, or is at least reflected in this resistance movement.<sup>1</sup>

The remarkable thing about this continent-wide mobilisation seems to be how well it works; how normal it became to reach out for partners across national state borders. Today's activists grew up without knowing national limitations in political mobilisation.

From the start, the Greens were part of this broad, pan-European alliance, and in many countries, they were the first political party to take up the topic and to discuss it in their respective parliaments.

### **A NEW "ESPRIT DE RÉSISTANCE EUROPÉENNE"?**

The existence of rather strong Green parties in German-speaking countries might have contributed to a 53% majority of the Austrian population who were against TTIP in autumn 2014, while 58% of the general European population, who were still positive towards the so-called trade agreement, averaged at 58%.<sup>2</sup> Since then, a common mobilisation gathered momentum and we now have a European majority against TTIP, with Austria still leading the anti-TTIP movement – around 70% of its population is opposed.<sup>3</sup>

All in all, there seem to be many reasons to be hopeful. The anti-TTIP movement has a lot of potential to be a powerful integrative force for the European Union: first, from the Trans-European nature of the resistance itself, where activists from different countries work together in the

1 <https://stop-ttip.org/de/unterstuetzerorganisationen/>

2 <http://kurier.at/politik/ausland/eurobarometer-oesterreicher-sprechen-sich-gegen-ttip-aus/115.504.979,>  
bzw. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/europaeische-union/eu-umfrage-deutsche-lehnen-mehrheitlich-ttip-ab-13399065/infografik-die-eu-buerger-und-13399197.html>

3 <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/71004>

interest of a common cause. In addition, many people have become interested in numerous European issues, such as European consumer protection, animal welfare, the democratic mechanisms of the EU, the European justice system, European patents, food quality and social standards. In all these areas, the need for a common European policy seems clear.

While appreciating the immense positive work of the NGOs and the Green movement as a whole, it is hard to ignore a bitter aftertaste and not to see the danger of a Pyrrhic victory. The problem became obvious in the electoral campaign for the Austrian presidency: the far-right candidate Norbert Hofer not only made TTIP one of his most prominent campaign topics, he repeatedly attacked the incumbent president Alexander Van der Bellen on this topic. Van der Bellen, a former university professor, initially made his resistance against TTIP contingent on a few concrete factors. A political mistake, this permitted Hofer to declare him a turncoat and put forward his own outright, unconditional opposition to TTIP and his refusal to sign it without a popular vote on it.

For a long time, the Greens led the political opposition against TTIP and it was the Green interpretation that was prominent in the media. The Green narrative ran along the lines that TTIP was big business against the people

on both sides of the Atlantic; that it was about defending the precautionary principle against the industries' interest to undermine it; that free trade should be fair trade and include social and environmental guarantees.

## THE NEW USEFUL IDIOTS?

We have to concede that there is a nationalist narrative overlapping our own stories, and this nationalist narrative has a lot of momentum, not only in Austria, but in Europe as a whole. The British UKIP expresses a nationalist, anti-European perspective, also shared by parties like the Front National in France or, to a certain extent, the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) in Germany: "*Fears of what TTIP might contain precisely illustrate why UKIP believes we should leave the EU and negotiate our own free trade agreements again. We find it astonishing that other political parties, while launching high-profile campaigns against TTIP, nevertheless remain committed to our EU membership. Their hypocrisy is shameless.*"<sup>4</sup>

Proof of the popularity of the nationalist story about TTIP can be found in every social media discussion on the topic, where approval of the efforts of the Greens is often mixed with nationalistic and even fascist rhetoric and symbolism.<sup>5</sup> This in itself should not

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.waronwant.org/media/ttip-and-2015-election-where-do-parties-stand>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jn2ndKuf7w>

be a reason for too much pessimism. A huge project like the resistance against TTIP, where we need not just a majority, but an overwhelming majority to mount enough pressure to overcome the power of pro-business networks in the political system and in the mainstream media, has to unite all the different factions within a society. We should not look too closely at individual motivations, also, regardless of whether they are Euro-patriotic, religious, left- or right-wing, ecological or anything else.

But the nationalistic narrative has become different in the last few years. Scepticism about the benefits of free trade are only one piece of a larger puzzle. It is safe to say that in the aftermath of the economic crises of recent

years, the whole neoliberal project has lost its appeal, not only in specific countries, but worldwide.<sup>6</sup> The weakness of the centre, of the hegemonic power of an essentially neoliberal discourse, gives rise to the alternatives we are perceiving everywhere. On the left, we see a revival of a socialist narrative, not by chance incorporated by older men like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. They both derive their credibility from the fact that they, unlike their parties, never bought into neoliberalism. But the real momentum

is unfortunately on the right, where we see political figures and organisations such as Donald Trump, UKIP, AfD, Front National, Sverigedemokraterna, Partij voor de Vrijheid and FPÖ etc. on the rise, many of them already leading in national polls and with a real chance of winning outright in their next respective national elections.

For every Green, left and social view on a specific policy issue, there is a nationalist counterpart. To use the example of Austria once more, Norbert Hofer not only attacked his Green adversary on TTIP, but also on his possible weakness towards the prohibition of genetically-modified food. This seems ridiculous in light of the Green historical position on this

topic, but it shows that the far right is prepared to attack the Greens on their own turf. In most European countries, the ecologist movement could free itself from a right-wing, authoritarian and nationalist ideology, which contested the left-wing interpretation of the Green parties on the continent. But in every major campaign, from animal rights to nuclear power or even regional and ecological agriculture, there are right-wing populist interpretations; in Austria, often forcefully supported by the influential tabloid “Kronenzeitung”.

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It is easy to see the possibility of nationalistic interpretation regarding the anti-TTIP movement. In an article in *Der Spiegel*<sup>7</sup>, Alexander Neubacher argues that the whole resistance against TTIP is a plot of the far-right, supported by naïve ecologists who fight the war of the nationalists. While it may have been the intention of the author to use the nationalists to discourage left-leaning ecologists from supporting the anti-TTIP movement, the result is to convey the nationalist interpretation of the TTIP resistance: it's their fight, so it will be their victory.

It's difficult to direct reproaches at the Green politicians and left-leaning NGOs, who led their fight in good faith. There were countless statements to distinguish between legitimate resistance and pure anti-American propaganda. The Greens honestly tried to complement their fight against TTIP with a more positive vision of not only “free” but “fair” trade and the necessity of common ecological and social standards, not only within the EU, but beyond. But unfortunately, this is hardly the message that rests in the minds of a broader public. The Greens and the Left could describe the anti-TTIP movement as just another defensive battle against the forces of globalisation, with no lasting peace in sight. The nationalists, on the contrary, managed to evoke the idea of a “positive” utopia, a return to the control and order of the nation state.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/31/witnessing-death-neoliberalism-imf-economists>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/ttip-bei-der-demo-marschieren-rechte-mit-kommetar-a-1057131.html>

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The perspective of successful resistance can be a very powerful force to mobilise people and to even create euphoria. But there has to be the promise of peace, stability and the spoils of victory. This is exactly the reason why the neoliberal narrative has lost its appeal. People no longer believe that at the end of all the sacrifices constantly asked of them, there will come a time to rest and a better life. They have understood that there will always be another good reason to squeeze them even more, that the profits always go to the same few.

The Green resistance concentrated considerably on the obvious false promises of the mainstream neoliberal promotion of TTIP. Yet, it's unlikely that many people on the street would be capable of naming a few basic characteristics of a Green alternative to neoliberal free trade. The same is not true for the nationalistic alternative project: everybody easily understands that there is the promise of the "good old times" of ethnic homogeneity; of economic and political autarchy. No matter how many obstacles lie in the way, no matter how implausible this nationalistic promise is, as a powerful utopia, it is at least a key to understanding policy decisions and making them worth the fight.

## THE NEED FOR A GREEN NARRATIVE

Historically, the Green movement was most successful when it simply offered a slightly 'Greener' version of mainstream policies. The archetypal embodiment of this approach is Winfried Kretschmann in Baden-Württemberg. This strategy is perfectly reasonable and honoured by electoral victories as long as "the centre holds" and the mainstream, hegemonic approach is strong enough to keep the longing for real alternatives at bay. And in Germany, the centre still holds, at least economically. But we have to understand that this "pragmatic" approach bears considerable risk. Greens in Austria have previously been accused of being solely the stooge of neoliberal globalisation, because the neoliberals were "as

8 <http://haraldwalsler.at/die-fpoe-und-ihr-partner-die-identitaeren/>

no-border” in their mentalities as the Greens.<sup>8</sup> If nothing else, this shows the potential of the nationalist narrative to plausibly link the Greens to the mainstream economic order, even though most of the Greens would identify exactly this order as their main enemy.

To understand the full extent of the looming danger for Europe, it is important to understand the nature of the deepening knowledge crisis as a consequence of the multiple crises we witnessed in the wake of 2008. The rise of right-wing populist parties in recent years could be attributed to the need for political change and discontent with policy issues. Every success story was rooted in respective national situations and people wanted right-wing parties as a strong opposition, not as governing parties.

Today, the situation has changed dramatically. The problem is not the rise of nationalist parties in different European countries, but the rise of nationalism as a disintegrative force in Europe. While a large majority “knew” for a long time that the key for economic growth lay in European integration, trade and “less state”, disillusioned people all over Europe are now starting to think that the way to a better life for themselves lies in national seclusion, less Europe and a stronger nation state. A crisis of knowledge means that people lose faith in old certainties and start looking for new ones in order to understand society, its mechanisms and their individual role in the world. If we

are indeed not just witnessing a passing period of weakness of neoliberalism, but rather a real disillusionment, people will be in dire need of a new, convincing story about the state of the world and its future. Nationalism is such a story and it has proven again and again its persuasive as well as its destructive powers.

The European resistance against TTIP has to be understood as a struggle of ideologies, where integrative and disintegrative forces for Europe joined for a common fight against the old but failing hegemonic order. On the eve of victory, it is crucial not to be blinded by joy, but to be ready to put forward a European interpretation of the fight against the stories of only national victories.

At the same time, we have to make sure that we have an alternative Green utopia in place to offer a new, attractive project to the public. It cannot be limited to a critique of neoliberalism, but it has to be a narrative of its own, able to confront nationalism with the prospect of a pro-European, social and Green-liberal future.



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