

EU-ISRAELI RELATIONS

Geopolitical perspectives in the wake of nationalist populism

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Introduction

In February 2019 during a visit by Viktor Orbán to Israel, Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu sent a clear message from Jerusalem to Brussels and the rest of the world by declaring that a strong bond exists between Israel and Orbán's Hungary, one based on "common values and common interests" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) 2019). The alliance between Netanyahu's Israel's and Orbán's Hungary is indicative of the enormous change that Israel has gone through during Netanyahu's era – an era in which Israel has become, much like Orban's Hungary, a right-wing populist illiberal and "soft Eurosceptic" (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004) powerhouse.

Israel's soft Euroscepticism is a rather recent development. In fact during Israel's early years, there were those in the Israeli establishment who were inspired by the European integration project and who worked hard to develop Israel's initial relationship with the EEC into a full economic and political membership in the newly established European Communities (Pardo, 2013). Indeed, in February 1959 Israel was the fourth country in the world to establish full diplomatic relations with Brussels (Pardo and Peters, 2010). Yet over the next decades Israeli–EU relations consisted of a number of conflicting trends that have resulted in the emergence of a highly volatile and conflictual relationship: one characterised by a strong and ever-increasing network of economic, cultural and personal ties, yet marked, at the political level, by disappointment, bitterness and anger. On the one hand, since the 1950s Israel has displayed a genuine desire to strengthen its ties with the EU and to be included as part of the European integration project. On the other hand and since the 1980 EC Venice Declaration – in which the EC outlined a number of principles that have defined the Community's vision towards the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict ever since – Israelis have become suspicious of the Union's policies towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and to the Middle East as a whole. As a result, Israel has been determined to minimise the EU's role in the Middle East peace process (MEPP), and to deny it any direct involvement in the negotiations with the Palestinians.² These sentiments have become particularly pronounced and taken on new dimensions under Netanyahu.

Using Netanyahu's Israel as a case study, this chapter seeks to contribute to the study of Israel's radical right populism by focusing on the country's relationships with the European radical right populist and Eurosceptic parties and governments. First we discuss the concept of

populism, claiming that populism is prevalent in Israeli politics because conflicts concerning the inclusion/exclusion of subordinate social groups have marked Israeli society since its inception. Second, we unearth the depth of Israel's relationships and alliances with Europe's populists and Eurosceptics, and we argue that Netanyahu's Israel is a populist soft Eurosceptic country that shares deep ideological affinities and common values with European radical right populism. Finally, we argue that under Netanyahu's leadership Israel has used populism, populists and Euroscepticism as a foreign policy instrument against the EU in order to achieve specific political objectives.

The pervasiveness of populism in Israel

Populism is a contested concept (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Kaya, 2021). It has been understood as an ideology, a discourse, a disease of liberal democracy, a mobilisation strategy or a political style. Most researchers of populism tend to view it as a “thin” ideology, or a discourse (Mudde, 2007; de la Torre, 1998; Hawkins, 2010). For Cas Mudde (2007) populism has two main themes: the view of society as divided into two antagonist groups – the pure people and the corrupted elites; and the belief that democracy is solely the expression of popular sovereignty.

Researchers such as Pappas (2014) and Müller (2016) consider populism as the antithesis to liberal democracy. Populists oppose liberal democracy, since emphasising procedures as well as individual and minority rights limits popular sovereignty. A different approach considers populism a political strategy. Kurt Weyland (1996) considers that this strategy consists in a charismatic leader that uses a direct, quasi-personal manner to approach a heterogeneous mass of followers, by-passing intermediary associations (see also, Jansen, 2011).

Populism is also considered a political style, defined as “the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations” (Moffit and Tormey, 2014: 387). The populist political style is characterised by the appeal to the people, a sense of crisis or threat, the use of “bad manners” and a coarsening of political discourse (ibid.).

Combining several of these approaches, we understand populist movements as political movements that use the different meanings of the concept of “people” in conflicts over the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups. Those movements consider society as polarised between the homogeneous people and its enemies, the elites and their foreign allies. Populist movements are constituted by building chains of equivalences between the claims of social groups close to each other in the social space (Bourdieu, 1985; Laclau, 2005).

The concept of the people, central to all populist movements, is polysemic. The people can mean the whole political community, the *plebs*, as opposed to the ruling elites, and an ethno-cultural closed community (the *volk*) (Canovan, 2005; Hermet, 2001). Populist movements use the different meanings alternatively as if they were one and the same. The different emphases on the three possible meanings of the term people differentiate between inclusive and exclusionary populism. Inclusive populist movements stress the notion of the people as plebeians, thereby allowing, at least partially, the political integration of excluded social groups (Mouzelis, 1985; de la Torre, 1998). In contrast, exclusionary populism emphasises the organic understanding of the “people” as an ethnically or culturally homogeneous unit.

Populism is prevalent in Israeli politics because conflicts concerning the inclusion/exclusion of subordinate social groups have marked Israeli society since its inception. Such conflicts stem from the interplay of several factors: the tension between the conceptualisation of the Jewish people as a religious unity and its heterogeneous character, the lasting conflict with the Palestinian people, and ongoing Israeli settler-colonialism in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPts).

The lack of a territorial definition of “we the people” and the conflation between demos and ethnos explain why most populist movements in Israel present exclusionary characteristics. In a divided society, the signifier *people* has become a major reference point for the constitution of political identities, and populism a central feature of the political system. In the late 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s, the current dominant party, Likud, developed as a populist inclusive movement under Menachem Begin’s leadership. The party developed a narrative of Israeli history that symbolically included Mizrahim in the common “we”; implemented some economic and social policies aimed at their material inclusion; and politically included Mizrahim by opening the party to a young Mizrahi political leadership that emerged at the local level and reached national dimensions (Filc, 2010).

Today, there are three parties in Israel which can be considered populist: “Shas” – an ultra-orthodox religious Mizrahi party, “Israel Our Home” – a party led by former Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman, and Likud. In the April and September 2019 elections, the three parties combined received almost 40% of the vote, reflecting the centrality of populism in Israeli politics.

Under Netanyahu’s leadership, Likud became an exclusionary populist party, with an anti-liberal conception of democracy. Netanyahu adopted populist exclusionary topics: nativism and xenophobia (mostly as Islamophobia), the people (as a closed ethno-national unity)/elites division and an anti-liberal understanding of democracy. Ernesto Laclau (2005) argued that the people is built through a chain of equivalences between the claims of different social groups. For Netanyahu, the identity of the people is crystal clear: “us” means the Jewish people, biologically defined by the orthodox religious view, as those born to a Jewish mother. However, he uses a chain of equivalences to build the “anti-People”.

In order to characterise the “anti-people”, Netanyahu builds a chain of equivalences in which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS) is like Iran, Iran is like Hezbollah, Hezbollah is like Hamas, Hamas is like Abu Mazen, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and all the Palestinians in the oPts are like the Israeli Arab citizens, and the Israeli Arab citizens are like the Israeli Left. All the links in the chain are enemies of the “true people”. An example of this chain of equivalences is Netanyahu’s statement during the 2015 election campaign:

Israel totally rejects the scandalous decision of the International Court prosecutor. Following her absurd decision Hamas already declared that they will sue the state of Israel. I won’t be surprised if we will hear similar things from Hezbollah, ISIS and Al Qaeda [. . .] the prosecutor decided to investigate Israel that defends its citizens from the extremist Islamic terrorist organisation Hamas that aims to massacre Jews. It is the same Hamas that has a pact with the [PA].

(Netanyahu, 2015)

Netanyahu’s chain of equivalences was not limited to Muslims only though, but also included the Israeli left and centre left (all of them referred to as “the Left”). Commenting on United Nations’ (UN) Security Council Resolution 2334 that reaffirms that the settlements in the West Bank are illegitimate, Netanyahu stated, “Left parties’ politicians, and TV journalists were extremely pleased with the Security Council’s resolution; almost as the [PA] and Hamas” (Netanyahu, 2016). For Netanyahu, leftists are not really Jews; as he explained to Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri in October 1997, “the Left has forgotten what it is to be a Jew” (Kan, 1997). In the April 2019 elections, Likud’s electoral campaign extended the chain of equivalences defining the “no people” even further. Likud claimed that Benny Gantz, leader of the centrist party Blue and White, would “form a government with the Arab parties”. This, Likud argued, was

“proof” that Gantz was not a legitimate alternative (Srugim, 2019) and that such a government would be supported by Tehran.

Islamophobia is central to Netanyahu’s chain of equivalences. For Netanyahu, the enemy is not really human, at least not as the people and its allies:

After a terrorist attack, we mourn. They make the terrorists their heroes. They name streets and squares after them. [. . .] He who indiscriminately kills innocent citizens does not struggle for human rights or for liberty, he aims at extermination and tyranny [. . .] as in Iran, Gaza or under ISIS.

(Netanyahu, 2019)

In this apocalyptic view, confronting this definitive evil is the Jewish people – a biologically defined people facing eternal threats of extermination. It should be noted, however, that when compared with European radical right populist parties, Likud’s nativism has unique characteristics. It is not territorial – Arabs born in Israel are not native in the eyes of exclusionary populists – but defined by the boundaries of Judaism. The non-native “Other” is represented by Israeli Arabs, migrant workers from developing countries, and asylum seekers (mostly African). Likud underwent a transition from allowing for the inclusion of Mizrahim to building most of its political discourse on the exclusion of Israel’s Arab citizens, whose citizenship they consider conditional. For example, in 2014, Netanyahu said that he “would instruct the Minister of the Interior to deny citizenship to those who call for the elimination of Israel” (Mako, 2014).

On the day of the 2015 elections, Netanyahu called Jewish citizens to come and vote because “the Israeli Arabs are galloping to the ballot boxes driven by buses paid by leftist Non-Governmental Organisations [NGO]s” (Bandet et al., 2015). During the September 2019 elections’ campaign, Netanyahu’s chatbot warned “Israeli Arabs want to exterminate all of us, men, women and children” (Goichman, 2019).

Politicians such as the Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev promoted legislation aiming to ban specific Israeli Arab Members of the Knesset (MK); and Likud MK David Bitan declared that he would be happier if Israeli Arabs did not vote at all. Moreover, Likud government passed a bill allowing for an elected MK to be expelled from the Parliament if approved by three quarters of MKs, a bill blatantly aimed against Arab MKs.

Likud’s nativism is also expressed in its attacks against asylum seekers. MK Regev, not yet in her ministerial role, called Sudanese refugees “a cancer in the body of our nation” (Regev, 2014a). Former MK and current Israeli ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, wrote: “The influx of undocumented men [. . .] did real damage to the social fabric of our society. [. . .] The Likud [. . .] will work tirelessly until there are no more infiltrators crossing our borders” (Danon, 2013).

The leftist elites are attacked as enemies of the people and accomplices of non-Jews. When the Israeli Supreme Court ruled against a law to imprison asylum seekers, MK Regev declared:

The court is disconnected from the people. The Court’s decision is essentially calling everyone in Africa to come to Israel. [. . .] The Court didn’t think of the good of the Israeli public in its decision and will make the situation intolerable.

(Regev, 2014a)

Over the past decade, Likud has developed an anti-liberal conception of democracy by which democracy is mostly about “the rule of the [Jewish] people”. Likud opposes central elements of liberal democracy such as judiciary review or the independence of the judiciary, deeming

all of them as undermining the people's will. Human rights organisations and anti-occupation NGOs have been demonised and called anti-Israeli, opposed to the common people's interests, and caring only about "infiltrators": "Thousands of infiltrators [. . .] are helped by human rights organisations, leftist human rights' organisations. [. . .] Human rights are only for infiltrators" (Regev, 2014b).

In sum, the Likud party under Netanyahu's leadership became a right-wing populist powerhouse. In the following pages, we add another crucial layer to the study of Israel's radical right populism by focusing on Israel's historical relationships with the European radical right populist and Eurosceptic parties and governments.

Israel and its relationships with radical right populists and Eurosceptics

In their recent study, Sharon Pardo and Neve Gordon (2018) argue that in the past years Israel has become a Eurosceptic country (Hooghe and Marks, 2007) that developed strong alliances with populist and Eurosceptic political actors – alliances and relationships that do not align with the norms informing EU normative policies (Manners, 2002). Building on Pardo and Gordon, in the following section we add another crucial layer to the study of Israel's relationships with Europe's populists and Eurosceptics by providing an overview of these relationships while arguing that Netanyahu's Israel is a populist "soft Eurosceptic country" (Taggart and Szczubiak, 2004) that shares common values with European radical right populist parties and governments. Netanyahu's populist Israel strengthened and deepened its relationships with Europe's populists and adopted a "national-interest Euroscepticism" (ibid.) in order to maintain and deepen its settler-colonialism throughout the oPts, as well as to advance its foreign and domestic interests.

From the time of Israel's establishment in 1948, the country's leaders were concerned with seeking recognition and legitimacy in the world and with breaking out of the political and diplomatic isolation that the Arab countries were imposing on the nascent state. Over the years and in order to break this isolation, to save Jews from persecution, and to secure the future of the Jewish State, the Zionist underground groups in Mandatory Palestine and the Israeli leadership were willing to cooperate even with the devil. Thus, for example, following Israel's establishment and despite the fact that members of Hitler's regime were influential on the German government of the 1950s and the 1960s, Israel's PM David Ben-Gurion promoted rapprochement with the Federal Republic of Germany (Shalom, 1996).

When Netanyahu first came to power in 1996, Jews were not persecuted in Europe and Israel was no longer an isolated country. Yet, like some of his predecessors, Netanyahu and his Likud party were still anxious to cooperate with the direct inheritors of the European devils – the radical right populist parties and governments. These new partners were quick to return their love in mutual diplomatic courtship displays.

A case in point is Belgium's *Vlaams Belang* (VB) party. The party – whose founders collaborated with the Nazis and its past leadership cast doubts on the Holocaust – is today an enthusiastic supporter of Israel. Filip Dewinter, VB's former leader, explains that the party is very often the only one defending Israel (Ain, 2005). An equilibrium of joint legitimation is clearly emerging: since the early 2000s, the party has only rarely been accused of anti-Semitism and is being perceived as a defender of the Jewish community. In fact, according to Dewinter, "there is a common interest between Jewish and Flemish people in the struggle against Islam in Europe" (Uni, 2006: 1). Hence, Dewinter called on Jews to join in the battle against Muslims: Jews "are our brothers-in-arms in the battle against extremist Islam" (Uni, 2006: 1).

Perceiving itself as Israel’s “ally against radical Islam”, in December 2010 the party joined a delegation of other European populist parties to Israel. They visited the Knesset and met with Likud’s Deputy Minister Ayoob Kara, as well as with the leadership of the Jewish settlers in the oPts. During their trip Dewinter and his colleagues issued the “Jerusalem Declaration”, a manifesto in which they vowed their commitment to Israel’s existence and to the country’s right “to defend itself against any aggression, especially against Islamic terror” (Moreau, 2011: 122).

Since it was founded in Germany in April 2013, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has stormed national politics and is today the third largest party in the country. While parts of the AfD are openly racist, unabashedly anti-Semitic and supportive of neo-Nazi movements, and even though its current co-leader, Alexander Gauland, has questioned Germany’s special relationship with Israel, some in Israel have extended their sympathy to the party and are advocating for closer relationships with its leadership. Thus, for instance, in August 2019, *Israel Hayom*, an Israeli daily closely associated with Netanyahu and his Likud party campaigned for an official dialogue between Israel and the AfD, calling on Israel to “take care of its own national interests and look at where it can find those who will help promote them – and AfD has already tried to promote a few pro-Israel initiatives”. The newspaper argued that the “biggest threat today to Israel and European Jewry doesn’t come from the Right but rather from the Left and its partner-voters in the Arab and Muslim immigrant communities” (Beck, 2019).

If in the case of its relations with the AfD the Netanyahu government’s feels it needs “outside pressure”, this is not the case with Italy’s *Lega* party. Matteo Salvini, the party leader, has called Israel “a fortress for the protection of Europe”, a “bulwark of Western rights and values” and has been critical of the EU for its “unbalanced” position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and its condemnation of Israel “every 15 minutes” (Lerner, 2018). Indeed, Salvini is one of Netanyahu’s closest allies in the EU. Salvini touts himself as “a friend and brother of Israel”, and Netanyahu calls Salvini “a great friend of Israel” (Landau and Lerner, 2018). In the words of Israel’s Minister of Public Security, Strategic Affairs, and Minister of Information, Gilad Erdan: “We are partners in the fight against radical Islamic terror which threatens Europe and Israel” (Yalon, 2018). Erdan’s assessment reflects Salvini’s position, which conflates anti-Semitism with hostility to Israel and ascribes anti-Semitism in Europe to Islamist extremists. Salvini has also promised to “take it upon himself” to fight “anti-Israeli bias” at the EU (Landau and Lerner, 2018).

Netanyahu’s Israel has also developed over the years a special relationship with Geert Wilders and his anti-Islam and Muslim immigrants *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV). Unlike other far-right parties in Europe, the PVV is not perceived in Israel as an anti-Semitic party with a fascist past. Wilders himself, who in his youth lived in Israel for 18 months and volunteered in an Israeli settlement, has visited Israel dozens of times and openly admires Israel (Eldad, 2014). Even so, the relationship is ambiguous. Publicly, although Israel does not boycott Wilders and his party, it refrains from hosting him at the highest levels. Privately, top Israeli officials have met with Wilders regularly.³

For Likud leadership, what makes Wilders an ally is his belief, as explained by one of his closest Israeli allies, that “the conflict between Islam and the West, between Israel and the Arabs [. . .] is not a territorial conflict. It is an ideological clash”. According to Wilders, “they want to destroy you. They want to exterminate Jews and Christians. [. . .] This is a clash between barbarism and wisdom” (Eldad, 2014: 4).

For Wilders, Israel serves as a model state: “I wish we in the Netherlands would have half the courage that you have to fight the Arabs. [. . .] We must learn from you”. For these reasons, Wilders admits that he admires Likud’s leadership: “I salute your leaders, such as Yitzhak Shamir, who knew how to attack back and [were not afraid of] European pressure” (ibid.).

Likud's relationship with the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) party is even more complicated. Originally established by a former Nazi SS officer, in recent years the party's former popular leader (2005–2019) Heinz-Christian Strache has adopted an extremely pro-Israel stance. Despite an official boycott, Netanyahu's Israel has not failed to respond. Indeed, if in 1999, when the FPÖ first joined the coalition government Israel recalled its ambassador to Vienna, two decades later, under the 2017–2019, Kurz–Strache government Israel proved far more flexible. What seemed to temper Israel's attitude towards Strache's party were Strache's views on Islam and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which are very similar to those of Netanyahu and Likud. In a 2017 letter to Netanyahu, Strache asserted that "Israel possesses the right to build wherever is required in the Land of Israel", including, of course, in the oPts and East Jerusalem. Strache further committed himself to do all in his power "to move the Austrian Embassy [. . .] to Jerusalem" (i24News, 2017).

Over the years, Strache has visited Israel several times, often as a guest of the settlers' leadership or of Likud. In fact and despite the official boycott, Likud's top leadership – among them five ministers, including the Speaker of the Knesset, the Chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and PM Netanyahu himself – have all met with Strache. Indeed, former Likud MK, Yehudah Glick, who for many years had advocated for closer relations with the FPÖ, confirmed to us that the informal embrace of Strache came from the very top: "Every time that I traveled I informed him. He [Netanyahu] encouraged me and gave me his blessing".⁴

While Netanyahu prefers to keep his relationship with Strache and the FPÖ in the shadows, when it comes to the Visegrád Group of countries (V4), Netanyahu's Israel is all out, and increasingly so. Thus for instance, Netanyahu visited Hungary to attend a V4 summit in July 2017. The visit is mainly remembered for its hot microphone incident (Landau, 2018). With his unintentionally microphone left on, Netanyahu could be heard during the closed-door meeting of the V4 leaders sharply attacking the EU, asking them to help him erode the consensus among EU members regarding Iran and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Netanyahu's goal was to establish a new diplomatic alliance with the V4 countries that would have Israel providing them with aid in different fields in return for their support of Israel in the EU and the UN. Netanyahu succeeded in establishing such an alliance and relations between Jerusalem and the V4 countries appear to be getting closer and deeper (Landau, 2018).

In February 2019, Jerusalem was to host the first ever V4 summit outside Europe. While the summit was ultimately cancelled due to a diplomatic row between Israel and Poland, Netanyahu did host the Hungarian, the Czech and the Slovak PMs at his residence. In the months leading up to and since that botched summit, V4 members showed their friendship to the Netanyahu government one after the other. In flagrant violation of official EU policy on Jerusalem, the Czech Republic inaugurated a Czech House in Jerusalem, Slovakia announced the opening of a cultural and trade office in Jerusalem, and Hungary opened a trade office in Jerusalem, which it considers a branch of its embassy in Israel (Keinon, 2019).

If Netanyahu's foreign policy interests are largely populist and Eurosceptic, for the V4 countries, and especially for Orbán's Hungary, the strong relationship with the Jewish state serves as an opportunity to push back against criticism that they are advancing anti-Semitic and xenophobic discourses and policies. As enthusiastic supporters of ethno-nationalism at home, the V4 leadership moreover admires Netanyahu for his tough position in advancing Israel's diplomatic and security interests and the internal policies he takes to ensure the ethnic character of Israel. The V4 leaders do not share the EU criticism of the Israeli government's stance on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Dyduch, 2018).

During Orbán’s visit to Israel in February 2019, Netanyahu explained to the media the strong bond between Orbán’s illiberal Hungary and Netanyahu’s Israel: “We are both small nations, democracies, that share common values and common interests. [. . .] It’s a very, very, strong bond. [. . .] The biggest common adversary to our common civilisation is the force of militant Islam” (Israel MFA, 2019).

Five months later in August 2019, Netanyahu visited Lithuania to attend the summit of the Baltic States. Like his visit to Hungary two years earlier, the focus was pan-European here too. Upon his arrival in Vilnius, Netanyahu effectively admitted that under his premiership Israel had become a populist Eurosceptic country for whom relations with the V4 members, as well as other Eastern European countries, are a strategic tool in its efforts to modify EU foreign policy. In Netanyahu’s words:

I want to achieve a balance in the [EU’s] not always friendly relations with Israel in order to maintain fairer and genuine relations. I am doing it through contacts with blocs of [EU] countries, Eastern European countries, and now with Baltic countries and other countries, of course.

(Beniussis, 2018)

Conclusions: deep ideological affinities and shared values

Since 1967, the Middle East conflict has defined the contours of Israeli-European relations. Israel has viewed European positions on the conflict as inimical to its security and as uncritically reflecting the positions of the Arab world. During the 1990s, Europe launched a series of multilateral initiatives, most famously the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)/the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), through which it sought to manage relations between Israel and the Arab world. The role of the EU in these multilateral efforts – and, more specifically, the EU’s failure to contain the impact of the Arab–Israeli conflict on these efforts – has only further undermined Israel’s confidence in the EU. At the same time, Israel’s isolation within the EMP and to some extent also in the UfM (Del Sarto, 2006; Pardo and Peters, 2010; Bouris, 2014), have arguably even pushed Israel into the open arms of the European radical right populist parties and governments. Indeed, it is political irony that to the extent that the EMP, the UfM, as well as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) all actively encouraged dialogues between all partners and parties on both sides of the Mediterranean, among the few successful dialogues these frameworks have enabled, albeit inadvertently and indirectly, are those between Israel and the European radical right populist parties and governments.

As we have seen, many of the relationships between Netanyahu’s Israel and the European populist radical right parties and governments are based not merely on “realist” interests, but also on common shared values and ideological affinities that do not sit well with some of the dominant norms informing EU policies. Thus, at a *realpolitik* level, the deal between Netanyahu’s governments and the populist far-right forces in Europe is based on *quid-pro-quo* logic, whereby the European radical right populist parties and governments may use the relation with Israel to dispel their anti-Semitic, xenophobic, anti-human rights and “brown” image and receive Israeli aid in areas such as security, cybersecurity, high tech, agriculture and technology; while Israel uses the populists and the illiberal governments to legalise its colonial project and to advance specific interests either in their country’s parliament or in EU institutions and other international fora. Yet on a deeper and perhaps idealistic level, the convergence among these

actors reflects ideological affinities and shared values aimed at altering, ironically enough, some of the core liberal norms associated with EU policies.

In most instances, Israel's alliances with the European radical right populist parties and governments aim to weaken the Union's norms and values (Manners, 2002). To the extent that these norms and values are contested within the EU, Brussels' efforts to construct a normative-based approach in both its internal and foreign policies – and by extension, its ability to exert pressure on Israel – are thereby subverted (Pardo, 2015; Persson, 2017). As such, populism and Euroscepticism have been transformed into an instrument that Netanyahu's Israel wielded to achieve specific political objectives and to sway EU foreign policy in a way that is conducive to Israel's own interests and objectives (Del Sarto, 2017; Horowitz, 2017; Pardo and Gordon, 2018). Netanyahu, we argue, offers a simple and a paradoxical equilibrium of joint legitimisation: European radical right populist parties and governments forgive Israel for its colonial project in the oPts and are even willing to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in return for which Netanyahu's Israel forgives these parties and governments for their neo-Nazi past and even their present anti-Semitism at home.

Ultimately, Netanyahu and his allies in the radical right populist parties and governments aim to establish in Israel and in Europe what Andrea Petó and Weronika Grzebalska call an “illiberal polypore state”. A polypore is a mushroom that grows on rotted trees, contributing to their decay. In the same way, Netanyahu's Israel and the European radical right populist parties and governments are “appropriating the institutions, mechanisms, and funding channels” of the liberal democracies. They are divesting “resources from the already existing secular and modernist civil society sector towards the illiberal base, to secure and enlarge it” (Petó and Grzebalska, 2017).

Netanyahu's Israel, we conclude, not merely instrumentalises the European radical right populists in order to alleviate external pressures directed against Israel and to blackmail and divide EU Member States; Netanyahu's Israel shares deep ideological affinities and common values with Europe's polypores.

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on Pardo and Filc, 2020. This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grants No. 359/17 and No. 90/13).
- 2 For a brief overview of Israeli–EU relations, see Pardo, 2019.
- 3 Interview with a senior Israeli official, Tel Aviv, 30 March 2017.
- 4 A telephone interview with former MK Yehudah Glick, 18 August 2019.

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