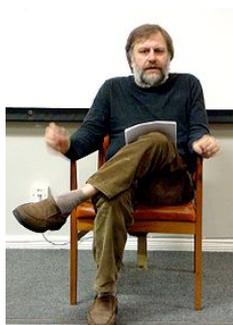


Far Right and Anti-Immigrant Politicians on the Rise in Europe

Пише: Slavoj Zizek

субота, 27 новембар 2010 18:59

(Democracy now.org 18. 10. 2010)



We turn now to Europe, where many are concerned about the growing acceptability of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. Far from just being expressed by the extreme right wing, the anti-immigrant trend has entered the mainstream. German Chancellor Angela Merkel told a gathering of young members of her conservative Christian Democratic Union party this weekend that multiculturalism has utterly failed. A recent German poll found 13 percent of Germans would welcome the arrival of a new "Führer," and more than a third of Germans feel the country is "overrun by foreigners." We speak to the world-renowned philosopher Slavoj Zizek, who has been called "the Elvis of cultural theory." [includes rush transcript]

Guest:

[Slavoj Zizek](#) , Slovenian philosopher, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist. He is author of dozens of books, his latest one from [Verso Books](#) is called [Living in the End Times](#)

AMY GOODMAN: We turn now to Europe, where many are concerned about the growing acceptability of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. Far from just being expressed by the extreme right, the anti-immigrant trend has entered the mainstream. German Chancellor Angela Merkel told a gathering of young members of her conservative Christian Democratic Union party this weekend that multiculturalism has utterly failed.

CHANCELLOR ANGELA MERKEL: [translated] In Frankfurt, on the main, two out of three

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children under the age of five have an immigrant background. We are a country which, at the beginning of the 1960s, actually brought guest workers to Germany. Now they live with us, and we lied to ourselves for a while, saying that they won't stay and that they will disappear one day. That's not the reality. This multicultural approach, saying that we simply live side by side and are happy about each other, this approach has failed, utterly failed.

AMY GOODMAN: The German chancellor later added immigrants were welcome in Germany and that Islam is a part of the nation's modern-day culture. Her comments are seen as part of a rightward shift and come just days after a study by the center-left Friedrich Ebert Foundation found that more than 30 percent of people believe Germany is, quote, "overrun by foreigners." A similar number believed immigrants had come to Germany for its social benefits and, quote, "should be sent home when jobs are scarce." Earlier this year, a book by an influential bank executive in Germany created an uproar, because it blamed the decline of German nationhood on the alleged failure of many immigrants to integrate.

As the debates rage on in Europe, I'm joined here in New York by a controversial public intellectual who's been called "the Elvis of cultural theory." Yes, I'm talking about the Slovenian philosopher and critic Slavoj Žižek. He's the author of over thirty books. His latest, from Verso, is just out, and it's called *Living in the End Times*. In a recent [piece](#) for The Guardian newspaper of London, he argues that "across Europe, the politics of the far right is infecting [everyone] with the need for a 'reasonable' anti-immigration policy."

Well, Slavoj Žižek, welcome to Democracy Now!

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Glad to be here. Thank you.

AMY GOODMAN: Put everything together for us, from Angela Merkel talking about the end of multiculturalism — even what that means, "multiculturalism" — to the mass protests that are taking place in France and beyond.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: I really think that usually we Europeans are a little bit arrogant, like we are the model of tolerance and so on. Now something horrible has happened, and what is really worrying is that it's not only the countries, the parts of Europe, that we usually associate with intolerance, like southeastern Europe, Romania, Hungary and so on, it's even the very models

of tolerance — Netherlands, Norway and so on.

What really worries me is — I will say something very simple, almost commonsensical, that, you know, for me, I'm here always for censorship. Through democracy, tolerance, in an authentic sense, means that you simply cannot say certain things publicly. You are considered — you know, like if you say publicly an anti-Semitic, sexist joke, it's unacceptable. Things which were unacceptable ten, fifteen years ago are now acceptable. And what I really am worried about is how the far right, what was twenty years ago the domain of the far right, is setting — even if they are a minority, they are setting the general agenda.

The typical rhetorical trick here is in two moves. First, you of course condemn the far right — "no place in our developed democracy." But then you add, "But they are addressing the real worries of the people," and so on and so on. So, in precisely — that's the dirty sophistic trick — in order to prevent hatred outbursts, we have to control the situation. You know what is significant about Sarrazin, the banker, that you mentioned? You know that he was politically close to social democracy.

AMY GOODMAN: Which means?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Which means that they — really, the extreme right imposed their topic onto everyone. But let me tell you now something which may surprise you. I, of course, don't accept this horrible logic — we have to do it more modestly to prevent real outbursts — but I think there is a failure in this standard, liberal, multicultural vision, which means every ethnic group, whatever, to itself, all we need is a neutral legal framework guaranteeing the coexistence of groups. Sorry if I shock someone, but I think we do need what Germans call *Leitkultur*, leading culture. Just it shouldn't be nationally defined. We should fight for that. Yes, I agree with right-wingers. We need a set of values accepted by all. But what will these values be, my god? We neglected this a little bit. You know that it's not just this abstract liberal model: you have your world, I have my world, we just need a neutral legal network — how we will politely ignore each other.

My second point would have been that it's absolutely crucial how this anti-immigrant explosion is linked to the withdrawal of leftist politics, especially in the matters of economy and so on. It is as if the left, being obsessed by the idea that we shouldn't appear as reactionary in the economic sense, that is to say that "No, no, no, we are not the old trade union representatives of the working class, we are for postmodern digital capitalism" and so on. They don't want to

touch the working class or so-called lower ordinary people. And here right-wingers enter. Do you know, the horrible paradox is that, apart from some small leftist fringe parties, the only serious political force in Europe today which still is ready to appeal to the ordinary working people are the right-wing anti-immigrants? So you see, we, the leftists, we have no right, absolutely no right, to take this arrogant view of offended tolerant people who are horrified — no, we should ask the question, how we enabled what is going on.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to ask you about this Christian Science Monitor poll that showed 13 percent of Germans would welcome the arrival of a new Führer. More than a third of Germans feel the country is "overrun by foreigners." Roughly 60 percent would restrict the practice of Islam, and 17 percent believe Jews have too much influence. Thirteen percent would welcome the arrival of a new Führer.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: I think — now again, I will maybe shock you, but, you know, don't exaggerate the meaning of this. No, no, I think that — OK, my first thesis, that Germany — and this makes it all the more tragic — from my personal experience, Germany is, for example, far more effectively, in everyday life, tolerant than France, for example, I claim with all responsibility. It's not as general as it may appear. Go to mixed part of ex-West Berlin and so on, you will still see wonderful collaboration. Don't worry about this. What I'm just saying is that we shouldn't get too fascinated by these details.

We should ask more fundamental questions, like this is, for me, only part of a general shift, which I mention in the text you kindly referred to, how the whole political mapping of Europe is changing in a horrible way. To cut a long story short, very briefly, 'til now, we had the standard situation that you also have it up 'til now here: one big left-of-center party, one big right-of-center party — they are the only two parties which address the entire population — and then small fringe parties. Now, more and more in Europe, another polarity is emerging: a big liberal capitalist party, which can even be in social matters like abortion, women's rights, relatively progressive — pure, let's call it, capitalist party — and the only serious opposition is the immigrant — anti-immigrant nationalists. It's something horrible that has happened. The anti-immigrants are establishing themselves as the only authentic — of course, they are not authentic politically, but in the sense of really experienced as authentic — voice of protest. If you want to protest, the only way to do it effectively in Europe is this. So I think it's a matter of life and death for a slightly more radical left to emerge.

You know what? Walter Benjamin, the great Frankfurt School fellow [inaudible], he said something which we should always bear in mind today. He said, "Behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution." It goes, more than ever, for us. Like, take — let's take your own country,

Kansas, which is now the bedrock of Christian fundamentalism. As Thomas Frank demonstrated in his book, *My God, 'til twenty, thirty years ago*, Kansas was the breeding ground of all radical socialist, and so on, mass movements. The same in Europe. This should worry us, not this arrogant — which always has a negative class connotation. When people attack common people's racism, it's always like we upper-middle-class liberals dismissing ordinary people. We should start asking ourselves what we did wrong.

AMY GOODMAN: And as you come here to the United States, your assessment of the Tea Party movement?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: It's a perfect example of what I was talking about. I had almost — I use the terms a little bit ironically, but nonetheless — a kind of epiphany moment when, a year ago or so, when they organized, grassroots Republicans, all those — the first wave of tea parties against spending so much money for banks. You know what I was doing? I was sitting in a hotel room, jumping between two channels on TV. One was Fox News — you must know the enemy to fight it. The other one was PBS. On Fox News, it was a live transmission of a tea party in Texas where a singer, kind of a fake folk singer, was singing anti-Washington, anti-state-expenditure song. On PBS, there was a documentary on the great leftist icon Pete Seeger. I was shocked at how the words, although the political meanings of it, were almost the same. Both were singing about we small, ordinary people are exploited; big bad guys, bankers in Washington, and so on, Wall Street, and so on. This is the tragedy. This is the tragedy at its purest.

You must know better than me. I don't know whether — as far as I can judge the situation, it was after Carter, with Reagan, when this grassroots movement and so on were more taken over by the right, like, no, the time of left, leftist, radical mass mobilization has passed now. When somebody tells you, "Oh, tea party, oh, out of a local grassroots protest," your first assessment is, are right-wingers again doing it, or what? This is a very sad moment. But no reasons — I hope I made it clear — for traditional European America bashing. And this is, I think, part of a global process of what I call the disappearance of the — what philosophers like Kant called the public use of reason.

I listened with amazement and great pleasure to the report about how here in the States the universities, which are financed by taxpayers' money, are more and more used by companies. In Europe, we are even worse. I'll tell you why. Because they stated clearly the program in Europe. It's not only this concrete problem — big companies controlling, through money donations, universities. It's something more fundamental going on. It's a well-organized, all-European campaign to turn us scientists, human or natural, into experts. The idea is, we

have a problem — let's say oil spill in Louisiana — oh, we need experts to tell us how to contain it. We have a public disorder, demonstrations; we need psychologists and so on. This is not thinking. What universities should do is not serve as experts to those in power who define the problems. We should redefine and question the problems themselves. Is this the right perception of the problem? Is this really the problem? We should ask much more fundamental questions.

Here, it may surprise you, but I still have sympathy for Obama. But in my view, one of his greatest failures is not Afghanistan. There, the situation is very complex. I don't know what I would have done. It's how he reacted to the oil spill. You know why? Because he played this legal, moralistic game, as if the — you know, like, I will kick — we know where — BP, they will make — sorry, but in a tragedy of these proportions, you cannot play this legalistic game who is guilty and so on. You should start asking more general questions. BP is evil, but are we aware that it may have happened also to another company? So the problem is not BP. The problems are much more general — the structure of our economy, why are we living like this, our way of life, and so on and so on. I think that this is the problem today. I'm saying this ironically as a leftist. We have maybe even too much anti-capitalism, but in this overload of anti-capitalism, but always in this legal, moralistic sense: ooh, that company is using child slave labor; ooh, that company is polluting; ooh, that company is — that company, whatever, is exploiting our universities. No, no, the problem is more fundamental. It's about how the whole system works to make the companies do this. Don't moralize the problem, because if you moralize it, you can say in the States whatever you want. Already in the movies like *Pelican Brief*, you remember, no problem, big company, even the president of the United States, can be corrupted. No, this excess of anti-capitalism is a false excess. We should start asking more fundamental questions.

AMY GOODMAN: Slavoj Žižek, your latest book, why did you call it *Living in the End Times*?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Of course, the point is to ironically refer or evoke this metaphor of doom, whatever, in 2012, we are approaching the end of times. And, of course, my point is not — I am not this kind of believer — oh, we have two years to live, then whatever will happen. But nonetheless, I think that at the whole — at different levels, we are approaching slowly — no panic yet — a kind of a zero point. In the sense of — let's look at ecology. It is clear that when people tell me, "Oh, but you are utopian," I tell them, "No, the only true utopia is that things can go on like they do now indefinitely." And it's very strange how we behave. On the one hand, we don't really believe there will be a catastrophe. We are split. We know it. We admit it rationally. But then you go out, there is sun, the grass is green, can anything happen. At the same time — this is ideology of everyday life — to make our conscience clear, did you notice how we are blackmailed at this everyday level? "Oh, you threw that newspaper away. No, you should take — "

AMY GOODMAN: Ten seconds.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Yeah. So, what I'm claiming is that we are approaching a certain zero point. We have to act. If not, I don't want to live in a society which will be here in twenty years, let us say.

AMY GOODMAN: Slavoj Žižek, I want to thank you for being with us, Slovenian philosopher, author of many books. His latest is just coming out now from Verso Books. It's called Living in the End Times.

AMY GOODMAN: In these economically stressed times, how we're expanding the war, how the administration is expanding the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Well, this is the first irony, that although Keynes is out of fashion today, Keynesian theory, but already from Reagan onwards, our economy is de facto, in spite of all liberal rhetorics, work in a Keynesian way. So I think the first thing to do is to denounce neoliberalism as ideology. I mean, by this, something very precise, that it's not what really happens in economy. We don't have neoliberalism. We have a very strong state economy intervening more and more, and so on and so on. We don't live in that world. That's my first point.

My second point is that, you know, if you ask me again, I may shock you, about Afghanistan. Of course it was a catastrophe to go there and so on, but it's really a tragic predicament because we, the West, by intervening there, we created a situation so that now it's effectively difficult simply to pull out. What I mean, just a brief point. Look, Afghanistan, I'm sorry to tell you, I'm old enough to remember, forty years ago, Afghanistan was arguably the most tolerant Middle East Muslim country, with a pro-Western technocratic king, with a very strong local communist party and so on. And then, we know what happened. Communist party tried to took power. They did. When they started to fail, Soviet Union intervened. Then Americans backed the Muslim fundamentalists. In other words, always bear in mind this: Afghanistan is not an old fundamentalist country that we should enlighten. Afghanistan was quite a nice, tolerant country. Its fundamentalization is precisely the result of being caught in the global politics. We, the global liberal system, generate fundamentalisms.

AMY GOODMAN: And explain that for especially young people, who don't know what you're talking about when you say the Americans backed, when the Soviet Union took over at the time, and —

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: I think that one of the key sources of not only Afghanistan, but general — Pakistan, Saudi Arabia — so-called Middle East problems, fighting the Islamic fundamentalism, is that, as we all know, somewhere in late '50s, especially '60s, as '70s, not only United States, but as far as I can say, the West, made a catastrophic strategic miscalculation: they thought, to cut a long story short, that the main danger are — because they can be manipulated by communists, whatever — are secular leftists and that strategically the correct move is to support, at least in the short term, religious fundamentalists against them, which is why, to be slightly cynical, you know, it's very difficult to find today one of these great Axis of Evil guys who wasn't, if not outright CIA agent, then at least closely linked. Never forget Osama bin Laden started there, when the West supported —

AMY GOODMAN: Osama bin Laden.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Sorry, what did you say? Obama. I deeply apologize. I mean, I still have all sympathy and respect for President Obama.

But, you know, this is the paradox. Again, it's the same lesson as — à propos of this new right-wing immigrant. We, liberal majority and so on — we created not only in some deeper sense that fundamentalism is the reaction to the excesses of liberal capitalism or whatever, but often quite — in a surprising way, quite literally, we created the fundamentalism. We have no right to observe it with this arrogance. "Oh, my god, how primitive people are there." Sorry, before we started to mess there, they were not.

AMY GOODMAN: And what about this war being waged abroad that costs a trillion dollars? Joe Stiglitz, Linda Bilmes, they predict \$3 trillion, and that might be an underestimate, over the years, the playing out, including supporting the veterans, when we have economic crisis at home.

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: This is a true danger, yeah, yeah. I think that military spending is already to such extent a key part of making our economy function that, you know, we really — the only way to get out, it's not just some peace movement, but again, starting to think much more radically how to restructure our economy, because you know what's the problem with right-wing militarists, that they blackmail us, but they blackmail us in a way which, at some literal level, has a moment of truth. Yes, our economies do depend on war spending. It works. In contrast to what neoliberals are saying, it works. All our relative welfare was the result of military Keynesianism and so on, so again, with all my respect for those who want out of the war, peace, I respect them, but it's not just this. It's the time to start asking more radical questions, no way to avoid it, about how our economy works, and with no illusions. I am not saying we need the old Communist Party. I am not crazy. I mean, if old communists are in power, they are now often even worse capitalists than we in the West. Look at China and so on.

AMY GOODMAN: The massive French protests that are taking place — I mean, I think when people here hear that massive number of people are in the streets because the retirement age is being lifted from sixty to sixty-two —

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: — people would only wish for that early retirement age in the United States.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Yeah, but let me tell you something else which may surprise you here. I will make a different comment, because in my country, Slovenia, the same thing is going on. Of course, in general, in principle, I support those who strike and so on. But did you notice how they are mostly — mostly — state employees with guaranteed employment and so on. A strange phenomenon is now exploding in Europe, getting more and more accentuated, which was here, we just didn't notice it all the time. Those who dare to strike today are usually the privileged, those who have a guaranteed state employment and so on. And they strike for these things like, no, we don't want to freeze our salaries; we want raise them up, while, for example, in my country, there are thousands of textile workers, women, who, if one were to offer them what — that situation with regard to which those who strike today are protesting, like "we guarantee you permanent employment, just with frozen salaries for next five years," they would say, "My god! That's better than we dared to dream." This is what worries me a little bit, that this strike waves, you know, are clearly predominantly strikes of the, let's call it in old Leninist terms, workers' aristocracy, those with safe positions. The truly needy and poor one don't even dare to strike.

AMY GOODMAN: But talk about the mass protests in the street in France compared to what we don't have here. We don't see that in the streets.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: OK, this is an old French tradition, and I wouldn't even overestimate it. You know why? Because — this is what makes me sad. There is no alternate — again, we are always returning to the same problem — there is no global alternate vision. They are — sorry, but now I will appear like anti-worker, but I'm not, please believe me. They just think, "Oh, no, we want this. We want our piece of cake" and so on. Well, what the left is missing is a kind of a more global idea of how to restructure entire economy. I mean, they are not addressing the true causes. This makes me very sad. This is typical. All that the left can do today is to propose — sorry, oppose — protest against reductions. The left is, let me be very frank, in this social sense, a conservative force. In the social sense of social, fast changes and so on, it's capitalists who are today the revolutionary class. This makes it very sad, the situation.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to ask you one last question. You keep talking about the bigger issue of the system, that that's what you have to look at. Explain.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: No, let me take the example of the oil spill. I'm not saying this primitive, old leftist mantra, "we have to change capitalism," and so on. But what even enlightened capitalists know today, it's not simply immediately this fight of good against evil to be fought in moralistic terms, more radical changes in how our economy is organized, in how we make certain political choices and so on, economic choices. It's a very simple point, that we simply have to start thinking in more global term, and so that you will not tell me, ooh, I am a utopian.

Let me give you an example how this works, a very modest pro-capitalist example. When I was in Norway, I was told that when this new crisis began, somewhere in the early '90s, already with this disappearance of the old welfare industry state, they did there something miraculous, very modest, no communist revolution. The representatives of different social powers — trade unions, industrialists — maybe this is possible only in Scandinavia — they came together and concluded a kind of a social pact. We will sacrifice these industries. We will take care of those who suffer, and so on and so on. They really restructured the entire country economically. It worked wonderfully. And it's not only because Norway has oil. As a friend demonstrated to me in Norway today, their per capita product is 50 percent higher than Sweden, even if you take the oil away.

Just the last thing to demonstrate to you how neoliberalism is ideology. I read recently a

wonderful sociological study demonstrating that Scandinavian countries, which still have an incredibly high level of healthcare, egalitarianism — in Norway, they told me, in a big company, even private, it's quite usual that the salary difference between lowest worker and boss is usually one to four. But let me tell you the other surprise. If you look at the World Trade Organization — no communist manipulation — the list of the most competitive countries, they are also at the top — an empirical proof that it's not true what neoliberals are telling us all the time are: too much healthcare, social welfare, egalitarianism, it hurts our competitiveness. No, it's not true. So I'm not saying socialist revolution. We still have quite a lot of maneuvering space for maneuver to do things better here. We just have to push things a little bit further.

You know, let me conclude with another thing that may interest you. People tell me, "What you are saying is impossible." Did you notice how strange the word "impossible" functions today? When you talk about private pleasures and technology, everything is possible, you know, like we will live forever, everything will be downloaded, we can do whatever we want. We say impossible is happening everywhere in technology. But, the moment you go to social changes, ah, ah, ah, the idea is — we learned the lesson from the fall of socialism — practically everything that disturbs the market is impossible. So what they ruling ideology is telling us, maybe we will live forever, maybe we will become omnipotent, whatever you want, all these new — we will all travel to moon — that's all possible. But a small social change of more healthcare is not possible. Maybe the time has come to change this and to less dream about these gnostic possibilities we will all turn into digital entities and more about quite modest social changes.