

Europe's Hidden Conservatives

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BRUSSELS, BELGIUM - On a cold, wet night, on the steps of neoclassical Belgian Stock Exchange building, a man with a gray ponytail was passing out antiwar, anti-capitalist leaflets in French and German. A few other protesters milled nearby. If you were a CNN assignment editor, this tiny knot of old radicals was your story.

But walk about the steps and you would find a more surprising story. On the floor of the stock exchange more than 300 free-market activists, journalists, and politicians had gathered to celebrate the first ever "CNE Capitalist Ball," organized by the think tank I work for, the Centre for the New Europe.

The black-tie event drew guests from both old and new Europe - from Britain and France to Montenegro and Poland. Indeed every European country now has a free-market institute or one in the works. (Tiny Albania is trying to get two think tanks off the ground.) And nearly every one of them sent a representative. The crowd would have been larger if the fire marshal would have allowed it.

While a member of the Swedish parliament railed against the dangers of socialism and extolled the efforts of the former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar's efforts to liberalize his country's economy, Bill Dal Col, an adviser to Steve Forbes, turned to me and said: "I can't believe that I'm hearing this in Europe."

He's not the only one. In the past few weeks, the news from Europe has been packed with massive antiwar protest marches, French diplomatic efforts to undermine President Bush, German dithering, and endless helpings of political waffles from Brussels.

Seen from the U.S., Europe is a monolithic miasma of anti-American fever, high taxes, and absurd regulations. That view is about two years out of date.

In fact, socialism is slowly withering away in Europe. Since 2001 left-wing governments have been defeated in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Denmark. Ireland now has a solid conservative coalition government. Technically, France, Belgium and Luxembourg have center-right governments, but *laissez faire* seems to mean something different in French these days. Yet even the French are cutting taxes and reining in their vast welfare state, albeit slowly.

Even Britain's Tony Blair governs to the right (he recently privatized the London subway, among other things). So inside the EU, there are only three center-left governments left: Germany, Sweden, and Greece. The German social democrats are at their lowest levels of support in the

polls since 1933. Less than 26 percent of Germans support Gerhard Schroeder's party. Sweden now has the largest free-market party in Europe (think libertarians who don't like drugs), which now commands the second-largest block of seats in the Swedish parliament. Only Greece remains a socialist basket case. So 9 out of 15 EU governments have center-right governments (counting Blair). Another two have large conservative movements that could throw the bums out.

And as the Left loses power and influence, anti-Americanism fades. Notice that the eight prime ministers who recently signed a letter in favor of America's coming liberation of Iraq were all from center-right governments elected or reelected in the past two years? Or flip the question around: What do Germany, Belgium, and France have in common? Germany has a left-wing coalition government, Belgium has a left-right coalition government and French president Jacques Chirac spent the last two decades "co-habiting" with a Socialist-Communist party coalition government. Anti-Americanism is a left-wing thing, not a European thing.

More important than the politicians and electoral victories is the growing array of free-market think tanks and activist groups across Europe. They make up a swelling army of scholars and writers who appear in the European television or write articles for influential newspapers arguing for open markets, lower taxes, and less red tape.

Many of these activists belong to the Stockholm Network, a pan-European free market group that recently hosted a conference entitled "Is Socialism Dead?" in Brussels. Some 80 think-tank presidents, activists, and journalists attended the conference. (To brighten your day, check out [this](#).)

At the Stockholm Network conference a few weeks ago, I met Chresten Anderson, founder of Denmark's new think tank the Market Center. He could have followed the path of so many Danes and moved to America. Indeed, it would be easy for him to do so. He speaks flawless English and has an American wife. But the 26-year-old has moved back to Copenhagen to start that nation's first free-market think tank on a shoestring, throwing away several lucrative private-sector opportunities. "I'm still young," he explained "and I really believe in this."

Slowly the network of free-market groups is changing Europe. There are many small, but hopeful signs of a conservative renaissance in Europe. Think-tank leaders say that conservative arguments are starting to resonate with ordinary people and are taken more seriously by the continent's op-ed editors. Small businessman and even executives are increasingly writing them checks. A new group seems to emerge in Europe every month.

Traveling around Europe, one finds a sense of excitement among young leaders. Today the European free-market movement is roughly where the American movement was in 1977. The good news: It is no longer 1968 in old Europe. But it is not yet 1980, either. And no Thatchers or Reagans have appeared yet.

Still there are many Europeans like Anderson. Too bad the American media can't seem to find them.