

HOPE NOT HATE SPECIAL REPORT

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY UNDER ATTACK

**INCLUDING A SPECIAL PULLOUT ON THE
2024 EUROPEAN UNION ELECTIONS**

H O P E
H A T E



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A WORLD ON FIRE?

**HOW THE RISE OF ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY IS
THREATENING TO CHANGE THE WORLD**

JOE MULHALL AND NICK LOWLES

2024 IS A YEAR OF ELECTIONS

Across the globe over two billion people are going to the polls for regional, national or international elections. All are important, but it really feels that the outcome of these elections could have a major impact on the direction of democracy, freedom and our rights in the world. If they go well, then liberal democracy could be strengthened, but if not, it will face additional threats and challenges. Unfortunately, the polls make it hard to be optimistic.

This super election year comes as we mark the 75th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which set out for the first time the universal protection of certain rights. It was blunt as it was simple. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security. No-one should be held in slavery or servitude, nor subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. All were declared equal before the law and entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. No one should be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, while everyone charged with a penal offence had the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial at which they had all the guarantees necessary for their defence. Everyone had the right to escape from persecution and seek asylum in another country, and everyone had the right to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association and to enjoy participatory democracy.

Article 28 declared: “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realised.” It finished with Article 30: “Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any rights and freedoms set forth herein.”



Prime Minister Victor Orbán of Fidesz.

Its publication was a direct response to the “barbarous acts which [...] outraged the conscience of mankind” during World War Two. Of course, the Declaration was more a statement of intent than a recognition of reality. Large swathes of the world remained colonised by signatories such as Britain and France while the Soviet Union abstained. Yet the document has become the foundational text of modern human and civil rights and helped birth international human rights law making it a standard against which we can measure progress.

On 9 November 1989 the Berlin Wall crumbled, followed by the Soviet Union itself in 1991, giving new hope that the admirable principles set out in 1948 would become a reality. The world watched as David Hasselhoff, wearing a piano-keyboard scarf and leather jacket, sang “Looking for Freedom” at the Berlin Wall and a wave of optimism spread around the world.

For many the end of the titanic battle between authoritarianism and “freedom” had been decisively and irrevocably won. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously claimed that we had reached “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”.

While Fukuyama’s comments were painfully optimistic, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remains unrealised, the quest for a world of freedom, justice and peace now appears more remote now than at any time since the height of the Cold War.

We live in a world where, once again, the call for universal human rights is increasingly rejected and consciously undermined. This is manifested as an assault on liberal democracy, the system built on the concept that every human being has inherent dignity and universal rights.

While still the dominant political system in much of the world, liberal democracy – characterised by free and fair elections, a



Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany is polling at a worrying 16.5%, second only to the Christian Democrats/Christian Social Union, who are on 23.1%. The ruling Social Democrat Party (SPD) is trailing with just 10.5% of the vote. Across former East Germany, the AfD is currently polling at 28.7%, well ahead of the Christian Democrats on 16.4% and the Social Democrats on 8.5%.

The regional vote shows even more alarming results, with the AfD leading in all three eastern regions where there are state elections later this year. In Saxony, the AfD is currently on 37.8%, with the CDU on 18.5% and the SPD on 4.1%. In Thuringia, the AfD is on 27.3%, with the CDU and SPD 14% and 5.9% respectively. In Brandenburg, the state surrounding Berlin, the AfD (17.7%) is just ahead of the CDU (17.6%), with the SPD trailing on 6.7%.



separation of powers, an independent judiciary and the protection of human, civil and political rights – is under concerted attack. None of this is to say that liberal democracy is perfect, or that illiberal politics isn't advanced by liberal democratic parties. But authoritarian states are growing in power and influence while numerous liberal democratic countries are increasingly transforming into "illiberal democracies", often at the hands of far-right politicians.

Globalisation has had many losers: the 2008 financial crisis brought countries close to economic collapse yet no-one was ever held accountable, and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down economies and eventually led to a cost-of-living crisis which has heaped misery and further economic hardship on many across the globe. And all the time, war and global warming has increased

the movement of people – within and between countries.

In many democracies, people are rightly angry at the effects that globalisation and a neoliberal economic consensus has had on their lives making a defence of the status quo untenable. If political parties continue to fail to meet the material needs of their populations the danger is that the system of liberal democracy itself will be swept away, ushering in systems that overtly reject the concept of human and civil rights.

SHIFTING RIGHT

Across significant parts of the globe, racism, authoritarianism and prejudice appear to be on the rise. Until recently – following the welcome electoral defeats of Donald Trump in America and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil – almost two

Giorgia Meloni
Photo: Italian
Government



billion people lived in countries with radical or far right governments. India, however, is still governed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP and Hungary by Prime Minister Victor Orbán of Fidesz.

Recent years have seen the uneven rise of authoritarian and far-right politicians continue with a series of worrying election results. In 2022 the Sweden Democrats came second, resulting in a supply agreement with a Moderate Party-led government. The same has happened in Finland, where the far-right True Finns entered a coalition government after securing 20% of the national vote and almost a quarter of the seats in parliament. Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy, the direct descendants of Mussolini's fascists, became prime minister of Italy after her far right party came first in the 2022 general election with 26% of the vote and almost a third of available seats. The contagion has also spread to the Iberian Peninsula. While performing worse than many had feared, Vox came third with 12.4% of the vote in the recent Spanish general election and in Portugal, Chega secured 18% of the vote and 48 seats in the 230-seat Parliament in its last general election.

Another worrying result came in last year's Dutch elections where the longstanding far-right politician Geert Wilders and his PVV Freedom Party won a shocking victory in the country's general elections. While negotiations to form a coalition government proved difficult, the result would have been

incomprehensible to most just a decade ago.

Exclusive polling for HOPE not hate, conducted earlier this year by DataPraxis, shows that in ten large European Union countries, far or radical right parties are leading in five, are second in four and third in just one. In two of the countries where they are second, they are less than 1% behind the leading party.

The far right is leading in the Netherlands, France, Hungary, Italy and Austria and second in Sweden, Germany, Poland and Romania. Vox, the far right party in Spain, is in third place, a long way behind the two centre right and centre left parties. It is unsurprising that many expect worrying results in the forthcoming European Parliament elections.

For some, Britain has appeared to be an exception because of the near complete absence of an independent far-right electoral threat of note. With the rapid decline of the British National Party and then UKIP and the early failures of Nigel Farage's Reform UK to gain any electoral traction some have claimed that Britain is bucking the international trend.

The truth however, is that Britain faces the same fundamental challenge to liberal democracy as many other nations. The difference is that it has emerged within and around the Conservative Party, rather than as a distinct radical or far-right alternative. This is in large part due to our electoral system which makes it extremely difficult for a serious radical right electoral alternative to emerge.



While the recent rise of Reform UK in the polls is having an impact on the direction and policies of the Conservative Party it is unlikely to result in any significant electoral breakthrough.

The danger, however, does not just come from far-right parties in power, but also how they influence the political debate, often shifting the centre of political gravity to the right as mainstream parties try to head off the threat. In Denmark, the threat from the Populist Party has led to the ruling Social Democrats adopt very strong anti-immigration policies, while in France, President Macron enacted harsh anti-Islam policies in the face of a growing far right ahead of the 2022 French presidential elections.

This problem is exacerbated by the increasing normalisation of far-right politics. Cas Mudde, a professor in international affairs at the University of Georgia who formulated the widely accepted definition of populism, argues that the increasing success of radical and far right parties isn't always down to a significant growth in their core support but rather in growing acceptance of them amongst other voters. "What has grown is the group of voters who have a tolerance for them," he said. "Those who wouldn't vote Le Pen in the first round of French presidential elections but do in the second. That group has really, really grown."

This growing acceptance and normalisation of the far right is perhaps the biggest threat we face. In too many countries it is increasingly deemed acceptable to collaborate with far-right parties and politicians. This will be a major challenge at the EU level following the upcoming European Parliament elections if far-right parties perform as well as feared.

A GLOBAL TREND

Of course, illiberal and reactionary politics is by no means just a problem within Britain and



Recep Tayyip Erdogan Mikhail-Klimentyev.

Photo: Russian Presidential Press and Information Office

our near-neighbours. The authoritarian Recep Tayyip Erdogan extended his two decades in power in Turkey with an electoral victory in May last year. His 20-year rule has seen the dismantling of the country's secularist tradition, the imprisonment of opposition MPs and critical journalists, and the curtailing of the independence of the judiciary and media.

In Israel, a far-right government is being criticised around the world for its extreme behaviour and flagrant abuse of power. The independence of the judiciary was severely undermined by a new law requiring all new judges to be appointed by the government, whilst its increasingly right-wing policies have only further diminished any prospect for peace in the region. Some of Prime Minister Netanyahu's ministers have gone even further. Israeli National Security Minister, Itamar Ben Gvir, recently said that his right to life outweighed Palestinians' right to freedom of movement in the occupied West Bank – comments slammed as racist by the US State Department. The Israeli consul general to New York, May Golan, boasted that she was "proud to be a racist". These comments and various pieces of legislation have led some such as Tamir Pardo, a former head of the Mossad intelligence agency, a massively respected institution in the country, to argue that Israel is now imposing a form of apartheid on the Palestinians.

The appalling attack by Hamas on 7 October, which killed 1,200 people in just a few hours, has only emboldened these extremist voices within Netanyahu's ruling coalition. Fighting "human animals"; making Gaza a "slaughterhouse"; "erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth"; are just some of the public comments made by Israeli ministers since the October attack.

In Argentina the outsider Javier Milei shocked the world by winning the presidential election late last year. Described variously as far right, ultraconservative, anarcho-capitalist or libertarian, Milei has called for a massive reduction in the size of the state. He also opposes trade unions and has pledged to repeal Article 14 of the constitution, which guarantees employment rights, pensions and social security. During Covid, he expressed scepticism about vaccines, dismissed the idea of global warming and called for tighter immigration controls.

In India, Narendra Modi began his bid for a third term as Prime Minister by weaponising Hindu nationalism and cracking down even further on political dissent and the free press. In late January he celebrated the construction of the Rama temple, built on the site of a

former mosque that was illegally destroyed by Hindus, as his springboard for election launch. Writing on the LSE blog, Amit Singh, described Hindu nationalism (also known as Hindutva) as “a combination of religion and nationalism; it is a form of cultural nationalism that emphasises the supremacy of Hinduism and the Hindu majority”. Hindu nationalism, he argues, is at war with a secularism which has held India together since independence. Modi is now spearheading this change and becoming ever more emboldened in doing so. His latest moves come after years in power where he persecuted and marginalised the country’s Muslim population. As we write, India is going to the polls and the world watches with anticipation.

However, the threat we face certainly does not come solely from the far right. Across the globe, people are being persecuted by military dictatorships, authoritarian governments and religious zealots. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan has stopped women working and girls going to school, while Iran’s own Islamist leaders have imprisoned thousands of people who protested against the country’s degrading compulsory veiling laws. In the last year alone, Iran executed 834 people, a 43% increase on 2023, many of whom were human rights activists and members of the Baluch minority. Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, director of the Iran Human Rights NGO, recently told *Al Jazeera*: “Instilling societal fear is the regime’s only way to hold on to power, and the death penalty is its most important instrument.” Iran also continues to support those attacking Israeli civilians and has recently launched a campaign of air raids on the country in retaliation for a suspected Israeli strike that killed an Iranian military commander in Damascus, destabilising the region further.

Meanwhile, women, LGBT individuals and opposition activists are rounded up and often killed in countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

China is conducting a policy of cultural genocide against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, banning their language, destroying mosques and other cultural landmarks and placing millions of people in camps. More generally, the regime is creating a surveillance state to prevent dissent against the country’s authoritarian rulers. The military dictators in Myanmar have meanwhile conducted a genocide against the Rohingya Muslims, killing tens of thousands, burning down over 400 villages and forcing 750,000 out of the country.

We are witnessing increasingly oppressive regimes in Africa. Governments are being

toppled in military coups, LGBT rights banned, religious minorities persecuted, and opposition leaders imprisoned, exiled and even killed.

THE RISE OF ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

As authoritarian and far right parties are increasingly winning around the world, the rights and freedoms that were enshrined in the Declaration on Human Rights and which are now often taken for granted are increasingly coming under severe attack. While this has been uneven and by no means universal, there is a worrying direction of travel that can be seen in numerous continents simultaneously and in many countries around the world the very pillars of liberal democracy are beginning to wobble.

This is not a matter of fascism returning as it did in the 1930s. Most of the far-right politicians and parties gaining success do so within the framework of democracy and while they severely undermine the institutions they attack, few look set on the total destruction of democracy, at least in the immediate term.

What we are actually witnessing is a challenge not to democracy itself – not yet at least – but to *liberal* democracy. In its place is the emergence of so-called “illiberal democracy” where democratically elected politicians ignore and undermine constitutional norms and institute policies that deprive some or all of their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.

It remains to be seen how far this process will go but the shift from liberal to illiberal democracy has to be seen in the global context of the rising power and influence of autocratic and dictatorial regimes such as China and Russia and their growing global influence, especially across Africa.

All this begs the question whether just thirty years after Fukuyama hailed “western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”, it could face being marginalised or even supplanted by illiberal democracy and autocratic dictatorship elsewhere.

RIGHTS CURTAILED, RIGHTS REVERSED

The consequences of growing illiberalism are being felt across the globe in the form of declining democratic rights, increased persecution and rising nationalism.

The latest Democracy Index survey, produced annually by *The Economist* found that under half of the world’s population (45.3%) live in a democracy of some sort, while more than a third (36.9%) live under authoritarian rule. The survey, which rates the state of

THE PESSIMISM INDEX

Polling by HOPE not hate in the UK devised a “pessimism index”, where we collated the results of those who said that they were pessimistic (as opposed to those who declared themselves optimistic), said that their lives were going to be worse than their parents and selected the word “declining” as one of their three to describe Britain today.

We found this pessimist group made up just under 20% of society, of which 92% were white (compared to 85% of the adult population as a whole), almost three quarters were without a degree and 56% owned their own homes. Just under half (42%) said they would vote Labour if the election was held today, while 16% would vote Reform UK.

Only a third of this group (35%) thought Britain was a successful multicultural society, compared to 52% of society generally, and less in this group thought immigration had been good for Britain than the average.

The same appears in other countries too. In our European polling, those who believe that their lives are going to be worse have far more negative attitudes towards minorities than the general population. They are also far more likely to support far-right or radical right parties.

Two-thirds of Le Pen supporters think their lives will be worse than their parents, while for the AfD it is 48%, VOX, in Spain, 45%, and 40% for supporters of Wilders’ party in the Netherlands.

In France, an astonishing 49% think their lives are going to be worse than their parents, with just 22% thinking it will be better. Similarly, in Italy, 44% think their lives are going to be worse than their parents, while 29% think it will be better.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, DO YOU THINK YOUR LIFE WILL BE BETTER, WORSE OR THE SAME AS YOUR PARENTS?

	Germany	France	Hungary	Spain	Italy	Sweden	Netherlands
Better	34%	22%	39%	41%	29%	40%	38%
Worse	31%	49%	34%	37%	44%	27%	26%
The same	25%	18%	17%	14%	16%	23%	28%
Don't know	10%	11%	10%	7%	11%	10%	8%

democracy in 167 countries on the basis of five measures – electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture and civil liberties – found that there had been a steady decline in democracy globally over the past seven years.

According to the 2023 World Press Freedom Index – which evaluates the environment for journalism in 180 countries – the situation is “very serious” in 31 countries, “difficult” in 42, “problematic” in 55, and “good” or “satisfactory” in just 52 countries. “The environment for journalism is ‘bad’ in seven out of ten countries,” the Index says, “and satisfactory in only three out of ten.”

A similar decline in rights is also being felt in the area of law. According to the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index, the rule of law has declined globally for the fifth year in a row. Their latest annual report found that the rule of law declined in 61% of countries, while it improved in 39%. It also found that “checks on government powers – including oversight

by the judiciary, legislature, and media – fell in 58% of countries this year. More countries have declined than improved in this factor since 2017.” In conclusion, the WJP Rule of Law index found that between 2015 and 2022 the Rule of Law declined in 64% of countries.

Pew Research has found that religious minorities are reported to be harassed or persecuted in 90% of countries across the world, a 35% increase since it started monitoring global religion in 2007. Christians are increasingly persecuted in Muslim countries, while Muslims often face hostility in Christian countries. A recent report found that Narendra Modi’s ruling BJP were behind most hate speech events against Muslims during the first half of this year in India.

THE RISE OF DECLINISM

Trying to explain why similar things are happening in different countries and continents is extremely difficult. The differences from country to country are of course as numerous as the similarities; there

is no monocausal explanation for what we are witnessing. Yet while the rise of the far right in each country has its own drivers, rooted in unique histories and experiences, there are similarities and international drivers that help shed light on these troubling times.

When it comes to contemporary debates about the modern far right in the West, few think to look back to the immediate post-war period to find answers and yet in truth, the Second World War and its aftermath significantly shaped the world we live in now. The historian Dan Stone convincingly argues that “the further from the war we get, the more its impact is being felt and the more its meaning is being fought over.” What Stone is arguing is that opportunity for real debate and a serious reckoning with the events of the war has only become possible since the end of the Cold War. Prior to that Europe was divided with each side of the Berlin Wall experiencing its own but different “postwar consensus”. The West in the form of welfare-capitalist states and in the East, communist dictatorships.

The wider world was also divided into competing blocs or spheres of influence, so local, national and even regional disputes – political, religious and ethnic – often had a limit, depending on the interests of the world’s two superpowers.

While not downplaying the fundamental importance of this ideological divide, Stone offers an additional framework through which we can understand the post-war period that helps, in part, to understand the return of far-right politics since the fall of the Berlin Wall. He argues that the post-war consensus was entwined with a particular memory of the Second World War and that competing notions of anti-fascism (an instrumentalist tool in Eastern Europe and the intellectual basis of political and social stability in the West) was, in essence, a fire blanket suppressing the flames of far-right politics. As such, the end of the Cold War and the “collapse of the political project of social democracy in the West and communism in the east went hand in hand with the death of antifascism, hence the reappearance of ideas and values which had long been assumed to be dead, or at best marginal and lunatic,” explains Stone. The beast was injured but not dead and since the end of the Cold War it has begun to reawaken.

None of this is to argue that the Cold War was a general positive but now that “fire blanket” has been removed a series of factors have converged to catalyse the return and rise of far-right politics. Among these longer-term causes are legacies of imperialism and

colonialism, societal racism and xenophobia and the negative impact of neoliberal politics and globalisation.

When it comes to globalisation it increasingly looks like transnational economic integration has simultaneously contributed to domestic disintegration with ever-growing divides between the “winners” and “losers” in society. Old industries were understood to be uncompetitive in an increasingly global world and often began to die out, as did the communities and livelihoods that depended on them. New industries and immigration appeared to go hand in hand, creating resentment in those who felt they were losing out. Finance capitalism and the single-minded quest for profit increasingly shifted factories and funding to newly developing parts of the world where profit margins were bigger, further dislocating societies and generating resentment.

There appears to be a correlation between economic pessimism, or “declinism”, and illiberalism and extremist views. The more pessimistic people are about their current position and the future, the more likely they are to be opposed to immigration and multiculturalism and also be open to anti-democratic and authoritarian solutions.

RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT

In many cases – particularly in Western Europe – it was social democratic parties that were the most enthusiastic cheerleaders for a rampant globalisation that while producing many benefits, also hurt some of their traditional base. Feeling increasingly abandoned and politically homeless, many of these traditional working-class communities became easy targets for a resurgent far right, all too quick to link their economic dislocation to immigration and anger at the “global elite”.

The far right began to rise in Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. The Front National, in France, began registering 8-10% in opinion polls from 1984 onwards, though it was not until its founder and then leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, got through to the presidential run-off in 2002 that it really emerged as a major political force. For four decades in the post-war period the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the heirs of Mussolini’s fascists, languished at between 4-6% in elections, but a new leader in Gianfranco Fini and a new name, National Alliance, saw the Italian fascists emerge as a junior partner in Silvio Berlusconi’s 1994 and 2001 governments. Though founded in 1956, it was not until 1990 that Austria’s Freedom Party won 10% of seats in a national election.

Nine years later, the FPO was in a coalition government after securing 27% of the national vote and securing almost 30% of available seats.

Elsewhere in Europe, however, the far right hardly registered in national elections though they were increasingly active on the streets. While the British National Front failed to win a parliamentary seat it did once have 17,500 members and influenced the political debate on immigration in the late 1970s. The collapse of the Berlin Wall, break-up of the Warsaw Bloc and the reunification of Germany saw a surge in far-right activity and violence across central and eastern Europe. In a host of countries, narratives and rhetoric about race war and terrorism dominated the far right in many countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The 2008 financial crash, and its consequences, also proved to be a seminal moment in the history of the postwar far

right in Europe. As countries propped up their banking systems to the tune of hundreds of billions, little was available to help those who lost their jobs as a consequence. As time went on, this raw anger hardened into an anti-system analysis. All this was compounded by a surge in migration into Europe in 2015, where the narrative of the political elite accepting millions of refugees into Europe was highly weaponised by the far right. It was not only the numbers which generated anger, but the far right narrative – pushed by the likes of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, but also mainstream political parties and the media – that there was a conscious agenda to weaken Western culture.

Bit by bit the electoral far right has gained strength, often securing support amongst those most economically insecure. Marine Le Pen reached the Presidential run-offs in both 2017 and 2022. Matteo Salvini led the Lega

	Germany	France	Hungary	Spain	Italy
I consider myself disadvantaged in society					
Agree	10%	15%	20%	30%	11%
Disagree	40%	60%	57%	49%	63%
Neither/Don't know	50%	25%	23%	21%	26%
I am satisfied the political system works well					
Agree	32%	15%	20%	30%	11%
Disagree	44%	60%	57%	49%	63%
Neither/Don't know	25%	25%	23%	21%	26%
Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together					
Agree	30%	38%	37%	52%	38%
Disagree	35%	24%	25%	18%	22%
Neither/Don't know	35%	38%	38%	30%	40%
	Sweden	Netherlands	Poland	Romania	Austria
I consider myself disadvantaged in society					
Agree	47%	31%	23%	10%	9%
Disagree	31%	41%	41%	69%	40%
Neither/Don't know	22%	36%	36%	21%	51%
I am satisfied the political system works well					
Agree	47%	31%	23%	10%	32%
Disagree	31%	41%	41%	65%	43%
Neither/Don't know	22%	36%	36%	21%	25%
Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together					
Agree	27%	25%	43%	55%	35%
Disagree	42%	39%	19%	13%	32%
Neither/Don't know	32%	37%	36%	32%	33%

Nord into a coalition government in Italy in 2018 and then again in 2022 before Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy party came to power in 2022.

Research by DataPraxis showed that President Macron lagged behind Le Pen amongst so-called “left behind” voters (made up primarily of non-degree voters who were employed but economically struggling) by an astonishing 53% in the 2022, whilst he led older, more financially secure voters by 58% over Le Pen. Polling ahead of the 2022 Hungarian election found that just 35% of people believed Viktor Orbán would improve their financial situation – this figure rose to 63% when asking voters with lower educational achievement.

Our polling also shows that far-right parties are performing well amongst people without a university degree or equivalent. In Germany, the AfD is polling considerably better amongst those without a degree. The same is true in France, the Netherlands and Romania. In Sweden, support for the far-right Swedish Democrats amongst those without a degree is currently running at 33%, dropping to just 11% of those with qualifications above degree level.

In other countries, the rising anti-immigrant and anti-establishment vote has been adopted

by more traditional conservative parties. In the US, Trump speaks to the same economically insecure audience, a massive turnaround from Reagan’s 1980s Republican Party, which spoke to socially conservative but economically secure audiences.

Even in the UK, where the traditionally centre-right Conservative Party has appealed to the same economically secure but socially conservative voters, recent elections have seen a shift towards less affluent voters. Boris Johnson’s 2019 electoral success encompassed large parts of the same socially conservative and economically insecure voters that strongly voted Brexit in the 2016 EU referendum and backed UKIP in the 2015 general election (when the party received four million votes).

DISTRUST AND THE INTERNET

Also fuelling far-right support across the world is rising distrust in the existing political system. Many polls show that increasing numbers of people think politicians are out of touch with “ordinary people” and politicians are generally disliked.

In France, 61% of voters are not satisfied with the way the political system is working,



compared to 15% who believe it is. Amongst Le Pen supporters, the figure is 78%. In Italy, dissatisfaction with the political system is at 63%, Hungary 57% and Germany 44%. This figure, unsurprisingly, is considerably higher amongst supporters of far right parties. Three-quarters of AfD supporters are dissatisfied with the German political system, while the figure is 65% amongst VOX supporters and 73% amongst Alliance for the Union of Romanians voters.

However, the figure is lower amongst supporters of far-right parties in power or have recently done well in elections. Supporters of far-right parties in Italy, Hungary, Sweden and the Netherlands all have far higher levels of satisfaction with the political system than those of parties where they remain political outsiders.

Far-right parties have obviously benefited from the failure, or perceived failure, of their political leaders to address the issues which they think are important, but it is also true that the internet and social media has massively contributed to its rise. The internet has created new opportunities for far-right organisations to reach and engage with voters and it has also helped generate completely new types of far-right activism. It also provided a means by which narratives, rhetoric, tactics and funding could traverse the globe and goes some way to explaining why similar phenomena are happening simultaneously in countries as diverse as Brazil, the US, India and Hungary.

All this has been exacerbated by Covid, which generated widespread opposition to vaccinations and lockdown policies which in turn helped to mainstream what were previously fringe conspiracy theories and anti-establishment ideas. This has only deepened distrust in governments and whipped up “anti-elite” narratives and conspiracies.

One common strand of far-right and authoritarian rhetoric is the belief that there are hidden, and normally foreign forces, secretly controlling power from afar. This conspiratorial anti-elite rhetoric can often take on an antisemitic theme, with Jewish philanthropists (like George Soros) and bankers (the Rothschilds) regularly being invoked.

Across the 10 countries we polled in Europe, 38% of people agreed with the statement “Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together”, with just 27% disagreeing. In Romania, 54% agreed, as did 52% in Spain.

Amongst the far right, the figure was unsurprisingly higher. In Austria, 59% of supporters of the Freedom Party of Austria agreed with the statement, while in Germany, 50% of AfD voters agreed, compared to 30% of the country generally. Half of Fidesz supporters agreed, considerably higher than the country as a whole, while in Poland, 55% of Law and Justice supporters agree, compared to just 13% who disagree.

We live in a shrinking world. Whether in our own community, our own country, continent or globe, we are interconnected like never before. Our ability to travel, communicate and cooperate across borders would have been inconceivable just a generation ago and while these opportunities are by no means distributed evenly, they have opened up previously impossible chances for progress and development. Yet the greater interconnectivity provided by the internet has also produced new challenges. The tools at our disposal to build a better, fairer, more united and collaborative world are also in the hands of those who are using them to sow division and hatred around the world.

TRIGGER EVENTS

In addition to these longer-term causes, there have also been a series of trigger events that have opened the door to far-right growth in recent decades. First was the wave of Islamist terror attacks, most notably September 11 in New York but also the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 7 July London bombings in 2005 and a series of deadly attacks in France. Mainstream journalists and politicians around the world normalised Islamophobic narratives and many advanced the pernicious notion of collective Muslim responsibility for the actions of a minority.

Another trigger event, primarily in Europe, was the so-called “migrant crisis” of 2014-2015 when large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees travelled to Europe from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. With many economies still feeling the strain of the 2008 economic crisis and years of austerity, some mainstream and far-right parties successfully exploited societal fears about growing numbers of people fleeing persecution, war and poverty.

Concern around the issue of immigration remains a major and growing issue and to deny that this is generating unease amongst large swathes of the population, especially at a time of economic stagnation and a cost-of-living crisis would be foolhardy. However, resorting to anti-immigrant rhetoric and racist and regressive knee-jerk solutions as opposed to



DO YOU THINK THE WORLD WILL BE A SAFER PLACE IF DONALD TRUMP WINS THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NOVEMBER?

	Total	UK	USA	Ireland	France
Yes, it will be safer	17%	16%	36%	17%	12%
No, it will not be safer	53%	53%	39%	55%	54%
It will make no difference	20%	20%	16%	20%	23%
Don't know	10%	10%	9%	8%	12%

	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	Sweden
Yes, it will be safer	14%	16%	10%	12%
No, it will not be safer	62%	45%	58%	63%
It will make no difference	16%	25%	22%	15%
Don't know	8%	13%	9%	10%

addressing the underlying issues of why people move is dangerous and counter-productive.

Together, these long term and short term factors have created a feeling amongst many people around the world that there is little to be gained from maintaining the status quo. Why continue to vote for traditional parties and candidates when it increasingly feels like they have failed to better the lives of the people they are supposed to represent? This is a failing of both social democratic and conservative parties around much of the world.

WORSE TO COME?

If things seem bad now, there is perhaps worse to come. In June, countries in the European Union go to the polls and early predictions are grim. Recent polling by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) suggests that anti-European populists are likely to top the polls in nine member states (Austria, Belgium,

the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovakia) and come second or third in a further nine countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden).

The ECFR predict that almost half the seats will be held by MEPs outside the “super grand coalition” of the three centrist groups and a populist right coalition of Christian democrats, conservatives, and radical right MEPs could emerge with a majority for the first time.

“This ‘sharp right turn’ is likely to have significant consequences for European-level policies, which will affect the foreign policy choices that the EU can make, particularly on environmental issues, where the new majority is likely to oppose ambitious EU action to tackle climate change,” says the ECFR.

Three months later, the voters in three German states go to the polls to elect their

DO YOU HAVE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE FOLLOWING GROUPS?

	Germany	France	Hungary	Spain	Italy
Immigrants					
Positive	10%	9%	3%	23%	14%
Negative	40%	47%	61%	32%	37%
Neither/Don't know	50%	44%	35%	45%	49%
Roma					
Positive	10%	5%	5%	9%	3%
Negative	37%	61%	58%	52%	66%
Neither/Don't know	53%	34%	37%	39%	31%
Muslims					
Positive	11%	12%	4%	11%	10%
Negative	42%	45%	57%	52%	39%
Neither/Don't know	53%	34%	37%	39%	31%
Jews					
Positive	28%	xx	23%	24%	27%
Negative	10%	xx	17%	20%	12%
Neither/Don't know	63%	xx	60%	56%	61%
LGBT+					
Positive	21%	xx	13%	42%	27%
Negative	20%	xx	38%	13%	16%
Neither/Don't know	59%	xx	49%	45%	57%
Feminists					
Positive	17%	xx	16%	32%	28%
Negative	29%	xx	28%	38%	22%
Neither/Don't know	53%	xx	56%	30%	51%
	Sweden	Netherlands	Poland	Romania	Austria
Immigrants					
Positive	23%	12%	13%	11%	9%
Negative	31%	45%	47%	23%	40%
Neither/Don't know	45%	43%	40%	66%	51%
Roma					
Positive	16%	12%	16%	11%	9%
Negative	39%	23%	35%	31%	31%
Neither/Don't know	45%	66%	49%	59%	61%
Muslims					
Positive	19%	16%	10%	11%	10%
Negative	49%	37%	50%	23%	49%
Neither/Don't know	45%	66%	49%	59%	61%
Jews					
Positive	44%	37%	25%	22%	25%
Negative	8%	8%	23%	10%	11%
Neither/Don't know	48%	55%	53%	68%	64%
LGBT+					
Positive	39%	32%	28%	7%	22%
Negative	14%	19%	30%	35%	22%
Neither/Don't know	47%	48%	42%	59%	56%
Feminists					
Positive	33%	29%	26%	24%	20%
Negative	29%	22%	27%	12%	30%
Neither/Don't know	38%	49%	47%	65%	50%

regional governments. As mentioned earlier, the AfD are currently leading in all three of these states. While they will almost certainly be unable to form a government in their own right because of the voting system, they could, feasibly, form a coalition with the Christian Democrats. If the *cordon sanitaire* is broken at a regional level, this could lead to a similar power sharing agreement nationally – to disastrous effects. Even if this does not happen, then the Christian Democrats will have to rely on a broad alliance with other parties, making the already popular AfD the official opposition.

A couple of months after that comes the US Presidential elections in November and polling now suggests that, despite all the controversies swirling around him, Donald Trump could be re-elected.

If all this was not grim enough, the far right is also likely to do well in the Belgian and Austrian elections and then, in 2027, Marie Le Pen will aim to become President of France. While this is a long time away, she is currently in a very strong position.

With each far-right electoral victory the political landscape shifts further to the right so now is not the time for complacency. Now is the time for action.

THE BATTLE OF OUR TIMES

Looking forward there is one unavoidable issue that, if handled badly, could exacerbate the problem exponentially. The rise of illiberal democracy is set against the background of a climate crisis that risks the very future of humanity. With global temperatures soaring, and set to pass the significant 1.5 degree level within five years, the consequences will lead to increased risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth through increasing droughts in some areas and floods in others. Climate change will also likely lead to resource nationalism, as countries compete for dwindling natural resources, and increased migration.

The UN International Organization for Migration has estimated that climate change could create as many as one billion environmental migrants in the next 30 years, while more recent projections point to 1.2 billion by 2050, and 1.4 billion by 2060.

Challenges we face now are nothing to what we can expect to face over the next few decades.

Climate change, illiberal democracy and – so by extension – antifascism are now intrinsically linked. The greater the warming of the planet,

the greater the movement of people from the global south to the comparatively wealthy north. The more the rich north introduces plans to reduce the warming of the planet, the more the far right will organise in opposition. For antifascists, tackling the rise of the far right now has to go alongside the challenge to address climate change.

There are big issues we cannot duck. Quite apart from the issue of the billions who will suffer adverse consequences as a result of climate change, the likelihood is that the numbers of people moving up through the global south will only grow – and probably grow massively. Unless progressives find a humane and workable immigration and asylum system, combined with economic policies to increase wealth and opportunity in the global south, then the far right will only grow. Likewise, initiatives to achieve net zero must be better explained and implemented and must not be shouldered by the least well off in society.

Steve Trent, co-founder and director of the Environmental Justice Foundation, told HOPE not to hate that it is “absolutely clear that the numbers involved, even if we went to net zero [emissions] tomorrow, are going to be in the order of many tens of millions, and possibly hundreds of millions”. When asked where these affected populations will head, he didn’t hesitate, explaining: “If you look for example at the Sahel, large swathes of sub-Saharan Africa, countries like Mali where it’s already effectively in permanent drought, those people are not going to head south, they are going to head north.” In fact Trent lamented the lack of legislative and humanitarian preparation, without which, he believes we will see Europe “stress-tested to the point at which it breaks [...] and its climate that’s going to do it”.

TIME TO ACT

The basic tenets of liberal democracy are under attack like never before. With nationalism and authoritarianism surging across the globe, we have to find ways to modernise and advance real democracy. Defending the status quo is simply not enough when so many people think the system is not working for them. While we have to robustly defend the institutions of liberal democracy and the concept of universal human rights, we must simultaneously demand a change in our politics so the needs of people in our societies are met.

This will require an economic, political and cultural response. Given that economic pessimism is such a driver for nationalism

and racism, we need to devise an alternative economic strategy to that offered up by nationalists. This needs to be internationalist in outlook, stressing the need to find global solutions to the problems we face, as opposed to the narrow, nationalist solutions presented by the far right – which will not resolve our problems.

This will require new thinking and we must be willing to challenge self-interest groups and the powerful media owners who do so much to undermine our institutions and spread pessimism. We must also continue to actively oppose those far-right activists and politicians working tirelessly to advance the politics of hatred and division.

On a national level, those interested in human rights, democracy, climate change and equality rights must start working closer together as we are all facing the same problems, and increasingly the same opponents. We need to increase cooperation, just as we need to envisage solutions that benefit us all.

None of this can happen in one country alone, but, rather, it must be an international effort. We can no longer be beholden to “market forces” and unaccountable international corporations who undermine people’s control over their own lives. We have to demand that liberal democracies, however imperfect, protect democracy, human and civil rights in the face of authoritarian and illiberal attacks. This will only be possible with deeper international collaboration. History has taught us that this is never easy but if we do not try, then individual governments will resist change for fear of losing out to competitors.

The prospects of defeating the growth of illiberal democracy – and all the reactionary policies that go with it – appear to be bleak. There is a very real possibility that the EU will swing to the right, far right parties will continue to win national elections and Donald Trump will win next year’s US presidential elections. Each far right or radical right victory will only embolden others.

When *The Economist* recently suggested that the answer to right wing populism in Europe was to allow them into government, believing that the realities of governing necessarily brought compromise and moderation, the author was probably not counting on the possibility that at least half of governments in western and central Europe could have far right parties in power (either alone or in some form of coalition). In this scenario, it is hard to believe that Meloni in Italy, Le Pen in France, Schnedlitz in Austria or Orban in Hungary would moderate their views if they

were in the majority across the continent. If and when Trump devises even more draconian immigration rules in the US, he will quickly be copied elsewhere.

And all the time, Russian and Chinese influence will grow across the globe, undermining and destroying any semblance of democracy as it goes.

However bleak the coming period looks, we have absolutely no option but to challenge it. The fight against illiberal democracy and nationalism is the fight of our times. It is truly an existential battle for the future of humanity. It is a struggle we have to win, because if we don’t, liberal democracy will wither and any hope to stop the warming of this planet will – quite literally – go up in flames with it.

But it’s also a struggle we can win. Most people are concerned about climate change and the future of the planet. We need to harness that energy, not only to make the changes that are required to save humanity but marshal these forces against those who intrinsically want to prevent the changes. Limiting or reversing climate change requires international cooperation in a manner that is not possible under nationalism. And if we can make the case for internationalism on one issue, then we can make the case on others too. The fight against illiberal democracy and the far right is now intertwined with the movement against climate change and for human rights.

Seventy-five years after the Declaration on Human Rights, the quest for life, liberty and security is perhaps even more important today than it was then.

EUROPEAN ELECTION PULLOUT

Giorgia Meloni.
Photo: European
Commission (Christophe
Licoppe)

Marine Le Pen.
Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen

Viktor Orban.
photo: Romiro

Geert Wilders



MAJOR FAR-RIGHT PARTIES IN EUROPE



THE FAR RIGHT IN THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR CAS MUDE

To better understand the forthcoming European Elections and what they could mean for the future of Europe, HOPE not hate sat down with the leading academic of the far right, Cas Mudde.

With the European Parliament (EP) elections fast approaching the polls suggest that much of Europe's far-right will perform worryingly well. With 720 seats up for grabs across 27 member states, radical and far-right parties are currently leading the polls in as many as nine countries, including Austria, Belgium, Italy,

Poland, the Netherlands, and France. Worrying results are also predicted in Sweden, Germany, Spain and Portugal.

However, the number of seats elected by each country varies depending on their size, meaning that even if the far-right don't come first in larger countries they will still send a significant number of MEPs to Brussels. This means that a strong showing from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) could have a real impact on the makeup of the EP as Germany has 96 seats in the European Parliament.



But Cas Mudde cautions against the idea that there will be any major shocks when it comes to the far-right vote, not least because it has performed well in the last two EP elections. Also, the results are likely to reflect the increasingly strong far-right results in many national elections. “People are often shocked by the far-right results in the European elections for the simple reason that we compare it with five years ago,” he says. “But if you actually compare it to national elections in the last two years, then the European far right doesn’t actually score that much higher in the EP than it does in those national elections. So for me, I don’t expect a shock anywhere. I think the far right comes out probably with about a quarter of the vote. And then the whole question is really what do they do with that?”

That’s the important question. A strong showing by the far-right doesn’t necessarily mean more impact in the EP. “European politics is all about group formation, because in the end, what we have seen is that the far right did electorally well in 2014 and did well again in 2019 but was politically completely irrelevant,” says Mudde. “And that could happen again.” The real danger will come if strong results are combined with effective collaboration after the elections.

FAR RIGHT GROUPS IN PARLIAMENT

While the EP elections are actually a collection of 27 national elections, the winning parties sit together in groups, defined by their ideology. The two furthest right of which are the European Conservative and Reformists (ECR) and the even further-right Identity and Democracy (ID).

While almost everyone accepts that ID is a far-right grouping, many in the media continue to call the ECR “conservative”. When asked if this was a fair description, Mudde was clear: “I think it’s ridiculous. There are still a couple of conservative parties in it. But almost all of the others are either bonafide far-right parties that were always far right, like the Sweden Democrats or Vox, or Brothers of Italy, or they are radicalised conservative parties, which are undoubtedly now far-right like Law and Justice. It is a far-right group. It’s a far-right group with the occasional conservative party.” Mudde says he is “99% certain” that Viktor Orban’s Fidesz party will join the ECR after the elections which will prove his point further.

Polls currently predicting that ID – which includes the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and France’s National Rally – could see the biggest growth, jumping from 59 to as many as 85 seats and the ECR on track to win as many as



France's National Rally. Photo: Blandine Le Cain



Brothers of Italy. Photo: Sergio Bertolini

75 seats. “If you actually look at the ECR and ID together, given that almost the whole of the ECR is far-right, then the far right could be the biggest ideology. It gets the most votes. More than the Christian Democrats, more than the social democrats and greens,” explains Mudde.

Whether in national elections or European ones, one of the dangers that results from a strong far-right vote is that mainstream parties feel increasingly able and willing to collaborate with them. The crumbling of the so-called cordon sanitaire contributes to the increasing normalisation of far-right politics and parties. “One of the reasons why many don’t want to call the ECR far right,” explains Mudde, “is because there isn’t currently a cordon sanitaire around them. The ECR is not one of the ‘normal groups’, but it is one of the groups with which they [mainstream parties] make deals.”

The most likely group to deal with the ECR is the centre-right European People’s Party Group (EPP). “I think the big winner of the European elections is going to be the right wing of the EPP in which the power has shifted

towards its more right wing parties. And at the national level some of these parties have been collaborating with the far right for decades.” To push through their agenda, they will use the threat of collaboration with the far-right to gain concessions for their harder policy objectives. “It’s not that the ECR or ID will get exactly what they want,” says Mudde. “But we will get more right-wing politics.”

NORMALISATION

Perhaps the clearest sign that far-right politics is becoming more normalised across Europe is how strong results are increasingly greeted with a shrug, rather than the outrage and protest that was the norm a decade or two ago. More and more, far-right parties are sanitised and discussed in a way that makes it easier for mainstream politicians to justify collaboration.

“What is most amazing is that last summer in Europe, the two parties that I got the most pushback for calling far right were the Sweden Democrats and Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy, two parties that have very clear foundations in the extreme right,” explains Mudde. “Not long ago no-one wrote a story about the Sweden Democrats without mentioning its Neo-Nazi roots. But now you get pushback, including from Swedish academics, for using the term ‘far right’. Many now call them ‘conservative’. So it goes very fast.”

The best example of this speedy normalisation is Meloni in Italy. “She’s never really been seen as radical but Meloni is a product of a fascist subculture. Whether or not she is a fascist herself is irrelevant. Most of her socialising comes out of the far right. And there’s no indication, as far as I can see, that she has given that up, rather, she is pacing herself.”

One way in which these parties have sought respectability is through support for Ukraine in the ongoing war which Mudde argues, “has become a kind of bellwether. It’s now seen as the defining feature of whether or not you are a democratic party and Meloni has understood that. Once you’re pro-Ukraine, you can go after the LGBTQI community at home without facing as much international criticism.”

THE EFFECT

There is no doubt that far-right electoral wins are a problem in and of themselves but what effect will they have on the legislative program of the European Parliament? “It’s pretty straightforward,” explains Mudde, highlighting three main areas. “The European Green Deal is already being dismantled as we



speak, especially since the recent farmers demonstrations. This will continue.”

The second area, unsurprisingly, is immigration. However, once again, Mudde highlights the role played by the centre-right EPP rather than just the far-right groups. “The EPP is strongly campaigning on immigration and bragging that it has formed these deals with dictators in neighbouring countries, arguing that they get things done, while the far right is just shouting. Of course, these deals don’t help, the asylum seekers will come through some other country. And so I expect more of this type of right wing politics to grow.”

The final area will likely be anything related to so-called “culture war” issues, namely LGBTQI+ and women rights. “On this the European Parliament and the European Commission has advanced some positive progressive policies, but they are going to be shut down by the ECR and ID.” This could cause all sorts of problems when it comes to passing any policies that take into account gender or sexuality. “I mean, as soon as you put a gender element into your economic policy, the far right will vote against it.”

AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT?

With such bad results expected, it’s not surprising that some are asking if the European Union is facing an existential threat from the far-right, much of which is highly Eurosceptic.

Yet Mudde remains more optimistic. “You have to remember that 75% will not vote for the far right. That’s an immense number, 75% is not just the majority, it’s a qualifying majority or a constitutional majority in virtually every country.”

However, he is far from complacent. “The existential threat is only possible because liberal democratic parties don’t defend liberal democracy. And if liberal democrats don’t think about what the boundaries are of liberal democracy, then what you see is that these boundaries are being pushed by the far right.”

Mudde finishes with a reminder of where the real blame lies. “If you see authoritarian politics rising, the first one to blame isn’t the far right. The first one to blame is always the mainstream parties who have voted for it. Because in the end, without the mainstream, there is no majority for far-right politics.”

■ **Cas Mudde** is the Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF professor of international affairs and a Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Georgia, and author of *The Far Right Today*.

THE FAR RIGHT AND THE FUTURE OF EU CLIMATE POLICIES

ANITA NISSEN, AALBORG UNIVERSITY

In a context of a widening climate crisis, far-right gains at the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections may substantially impact the EU's climate policy, not least in relation to environmental preservation.

The issue of climate change has become a highly divisive policy topic across Europe. Whereas European public opinion polls show a heightened fear about its potential impact on citizens' lives and calls for political action, a substantial part of the population is currently also drawn to the Eurosceptic, nationalist, and populist notions put forward by radical right parties, particularly regarding the rural-urban divide.

A UNITED FAR RIGHT ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE POLICY?

While historically the issue of climate change has not been highly prioritised by most radical right parties, Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement influenced (inter)national policymaking and the discourses of numerous western European populist radical right (PRR) parties (however, the issue remains marginal in most central and eastern European countries).

European far-right actors have varied views on climate change and the natural environment. As the academic Bernhard Forchtner explains, these differences not only relate to ideology, but also to their varied historical and political contexts. However, whereas historically, numerous far-right actors have emphasised the significance of the natural environment from a nativist, identity-related, and/or ecological perspective and called for the nurturing of nature as a cultural site, the topic of climate change is different.

Many far-right actors are sceptical towards climate action and feel that the proposed policy measures are too far-reaching. Several PRR parties have (at least in the past) questioned the anthropogenic nature

of climate change, and some, such as the Freedom Party of Austria, have employed conspiratorial narratives to make their climate-related argument. Whereas only few PRR parties explicitly deny climate change, Jakob Schwörer and Fernández-García argue that "on average, populist radical-right parties are much more sceptical of climate protection than other party families".

Moreover, they also find that the parties differ in their explicit policy stances, with some supporting climate protection measures, whereas others are less convinced about, and at times trivialise, the severity of the crisis. Among the more sceptical, we currently find Alternative for Germany, the two Dutch parties Party for Freedom (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FvD), and the Spanish Vox party. As shown in a European overview of PRR parties' climate stances published by the Belgian news site Apache, the AfD criticises the so-called "climate hysteria" of the left-wing elites; Vox attacks the "climate religion lobby"; PVV argues that climate change is a historically natural development (thus "simply" requiring adaptation); while FvD completely denies the occurrence of the phenomenon.

However, there is some evidence to suggest that governing positions moderate PRR parties' climate policy views. For example, the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party's position became substantially more moderate when it became a governing party.

Similarly, FPÖ's use of post-factual framing also decreased after it became part of the Austrian government. Yet, at the same time, a study by Robert A. Huber and colleagues concludes that whereas the two PRR parties' positions may be more moderate, "such populist forces do pose a governance challenge for collective EU ECP [European Climate Pact]. When in power, they bargain hard to win concessions or opt-outs and attempt to limit the ambition of ECP, often



Protest against the AfD before the constitution of the Bundestag. Photo: Martin Heinlein / DIE LINKE

in concert with like-minded non-populist governments”.

Hence, the current situation where several countries have PRR parties as part of the government does not necessarily entail a moderated climate policy stance, especially considering their potential vote gains by supporting the green backlash currently arising in the European countryside.

CURRENT PRR BATTLEGROUND: THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE AND FARMERS' PROTESTS

In a more recent turn, several populist radical-right parties have begun explicitly addressing the burden that EU climate policy places on the rural population, particularly farmers. Addressing the ongoing farmers' protests, which began in 2023 and have been particularly sizable in Poland, Germany, France, and Italy (four of the largest EU member states), several PRR parties now more clearly promote themselves as guardians of the countryside. They do so by rhetorically constructing dichotomies between urban elites and rural people and vocalising the latter's resentment over economic hardships, while constructing identity-based narratives around life in the countryside.

In rather opportunistic moves, PRR parties such as Alternative for Germany, the French National Rally, Flemish Interest, the Polish Law and Justice party, Spanish Vox, Italian Lega, Brothers of Italy, the Denmark Democrats,

plus also Irish far-right extremist groups are attempting to tap into the frustrations and anger voiced by domestic farmers. Considering recent polls in France and Germany, this stance appears to be particularly effective as an oppositional strategy for National Rally and Alternative for Germany, which both use it to criticise the domestic government and the EU.

While the farmers' demands vary both within and across the countries, their overarching anti-EU sentiments are being addressed by the far right. In France, for instance, parts of the complaints relate to complex and cumbersome EU regulations, Eurosceptic arguments often advanced by the European far right.

As Jordan Bardella, National Rally's leading candidate, has announced, he would see his EP role as being a “whistleblower for the French to see what really is happening inside the European Commission”, while also criticising Emmanuel Macron for the EU's current direction (due to France's key role in shaping EU politics together with Germany). He has also promoted so-called “economic patriotism” for agriculture in a bid to address French farmers' demands for higher wages, and has spent much time visiting both agricultural sites and other ailing French industries, such as fisheries, as part of his electoral campaign.

Together with the large-scale farmers' protests, the far right have already had a detrimental effect on several recently proposed EU environmental and climate policies. For several decades, the EU has been considered one of the most progressive international actors regarding climate and environmental policy, not least with Ursula von der Leyen's introduction of the European Green Deal in 2019 and the later agreement to cut EU emissions by 55% by 2030.

While the EU has recently adopted several directives and regulations as part of the highly ambitious and encompassing European Green Deal, onlookers fear that the upcoming EP elections may put an end to this endeavour, due to the projected gains of the far right. Recent EU events also indicate that the momentum for progressive climate policies is being lost.

Responding to the rising rural disquiet in several EU member states, both the European Commission, the European Council, and the centre-right European People's Party Group in the EP have felt pressured to accommodate the demands of the agricultural sector, in part to abate the projected far-right voter grab. Firstly, at the start of the year, von der Leyen and the European Commission decided to cancel efforts to introduce new EU

pesticide regulations, and later to diminish the environmental demands for farmers receiving agricultural subsidies, partly in response to Brussels-based farmers' protests.

Similarly, unlike the situation in 2019, where climate change mitigation was a central focus for the European Council, a recently leaked EU document shows that the EU priority list for the next five years hardly mentions the environment or climate policy. Instead, with a big majority of the EU member states currently being headed by right-wing parties, including several on the far right, the agenda is focused on defence, security, and migration.

As Politico so succinctly put it, the council promotes "bullets, not bees", while also working to "ensure our food security through a vibrant agriculture sector," i.e. back the farmers' demands for more support. Moreover, like other PRR actors, Viktor Orbán in Hungary has used the farmers' protests to highlight public disquiet about the EU's green measures, and Hungary is highly unlikely to prioritise climate policies during its (much criticised) upcoming council presidency (July-December 2024). Finally, since 2023, the EPP has been pushing for the watering down or complete scrapping of proposed environmental legislative acts due to fear of losing their traditional rural voter base at both the national and the upcoming EP elections.

The recent failure to adopt the Nature Restoration Law is a good indication of the potential future for EU climate and environmental policies, if far-right parties make the projected strides at the upcoming elections. Intending to reverse the decline of European nature, the proposed law aimed to restore large parts of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030, and several of its measures applied to the agricultural sector. The events in both the EP and the European Council clearly demonstrate both the conservatives' and the far right's wish to appeal to their rural electorates. Not only have the EPP considerably watered down the Commission's proposal during the initial round of negotiations, but after its initial adoption by both the EP and the Council, the group renounced the deal. Arguing that it would be "better to start from scratch and put farmers' interests first", the EPP tried to remove it from the negotiation table by forming an alliance with the two FAR-RIGHT EP-groups ECR AND ID. This further indicated a future willingness to collaborate with the far right in the EP, something it had already been accused of doing in July 2023 during the previous negotiation round on the same legislative act.

While the EPP was not successful in overturning the bill in February, a month later, four EU member state leaders decided to reject its final adoption, namely Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, and Hungary – all countries with electorally very strong far-right parties. While these countries' opposition to the bill cannot solely be explained by domestic far-right pressure, particularly Orbán's last minute change of mind, it can mainly be considered a provocative manoeuvre rather than policy conviction (also because the Fidesz party had earlier supported the act).

A WORRYING FUTURE?

While the European PRR parties have widely differing policy stances regarding the environment and especially the climate, they have found a united rallying point around the rising rural discontent across several EU member states. The green backlash is a new identity-related issue where the far right can vie for voters by using populist and Eurosceptic discourses.

At the same time, this strategy exposes that their environmentalist notions are easily discarded, when opportunity arises to express hostility towards the liberal elites, a vote-seeking strategy that appears to be working. Supporting the rural population both allows the PRR parties to construct enemies such as the "cosmopolitan" and "green", "hysterical" elites, staunchly attack the EU's "green crusade", "tsunami of rules," and "technocratic" policies, while drawing on national identity narratives around rural life and labour. Hence, even though the parties may lack common positions on many climate-related policy issues, the defence of farmers may at least in the short term prove to be something they can agree upon.

Moreover, and more worryingly regarding the climate crisis mitigation, the EPP has now also opened the door even further for right-wing collaboration in the European Parliament. While both the conservatives and the far right are likely to campaign around pro-farmer and pro-industry policies in the upcoming election debates, conversely the global climate movement has lost momentum, the green parties are projected to do poorly at the upcoming elections, and the socialist and democrat members are still struggling to develop a coherent, broad-based and united climate policy stance. In combination, all these factors pave the way for a dire climate future.

ORBÁN'S FIDESZ AND THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: UNEXPECTED DOMESTIC CHALLENGES, AMBITIOUS EUROPEAN GOALS

ANDRÁS BÍRO-NAGY, DIRECTOR OF POLICY SOLUTIONS

The European Parliamentary election campaign is taking place in Hungary at a time when the Orbán government is facing its most difficult period since the Fidesz party came to power in 2010. A new chapter in Hungarian politics began in early February 2024, when the bombshell news hit: President Katalin Novák had decided to pardon an individual who had been convicted of trying to cover up the crimes of a paedophile. It took just over a week after the scandal broke for Novák to announce her resignation.

On the same day, former justice minister Judit Varga (who countersigned the pardon) resigned from Parliament and announced that she would not stand as the lead candidate of Fidesz in the European Parliament (EP) election. In one fell swoop, the two most prominent women in Fidesz were gone.

Fidesz has been on the defensive ever since. In a very unusual way, Fidesz is not dominating the political agenda and cannot force the EP election campaign to focus on the issues it had planned: defending Hungary's sovereignty against Brussels and Western liberals, and accusing the opposition of being "pro-war", while Fidesz takes a "pro-peace" position on the Russia-Ukraine war. In contrast, Fidesz is conducting its entire campaign in a reactive mode and remains unsure of what to do with the emergence of a new political actor, Péter Magyar – the former husband of ex-minister Varga.

Magyar appeared on the Hungarian political scene the day after his ex-wife's resignation and has dominated the headlines since then. His agenda focuses on the corruption of the Orbán government and the propaganda



Mr Viktor Orbán, Hungarian Prime Minister.
Photo: European Council

machine, but he also has a scathing opinion of the established opposition.

While opinion polls suggest that Magyar's new party – Respect and Freedom (TISZA) – could get over 20% of the vote, Fidesz is predicted to have its worst EP election result in its history (Fidesz has always done very well in EP elections, with its worst ever result of 47% in 2004). When compared to other parties in Europe, Fidesz can still expect a solid result, but it is unlikely to repeat its previous outstanding performances and may send fewer MEPs to Brussels and Strasbourg than in the previous term.

The Péter Magyar phenomenon is illustrative of several broader issues. For one, it shows that a discernible portion of the public is very hungry for political change and craves someone who can challenge PM Viktor Orbán. That craving is so strong that many are willing to line up behind a complete political novice without any track record or vetting. Some of these are disillusioned former Fidesz voters who are right-wing in their basic political outlook.

Yet, interestingly, many progressives have turned towards the man who openly says that ideologically, he is close to what Fidesz claims to be. Furthermore, Magyar's rapid surge highlights the weakness of the established opposition, which is seen as incapable of posing a genuine challenge to Fidesz. Outside the massive force that is the Fidesz camp, the lack of an opposition that is perceived as potent enough to be an alternative government has created a massive vacuum in Hungarian politics that has sucked in and propelled to fame a second-tier Fidesz functionary based on a bit of political promise.

While Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party struggles with unexpected domestic political challenges, it has set itself ambitious European strategic goals. While bashing the EU and the West has become a constant feature of Fidesz's campaigns, Orbán has made it clear that he wants to "occupy" the EU, not leave it. Also, it is not entirely accurate to say that the Orbán government neglects the West altogether. This applies to relations with countries that have mainstream governments; in other words, the vast majority of Hungary's Western partners.

At the same time, the Hungarian government is intensely building ties with like-minded anti-liberal populist parties in the West. Often, these are parties that are at the fringe of the political spectrum, and thus, while they may be influential, they are unlikely to take the reins of government in the near future. Yet some of these formerly fringe parties have established themselves as serious

competitors to the mainstream parties (e.g. the National Rally in France) and some have even become successful enough electorally to win governmental positions (e.g. the Brothers of Italy and the League in Italy).

Viktor Orbán's bold disregard for the opinion of EU institutions and EU partners is manifest in the continued campaigns against Brussels and specific EU officials, most recently Ursula von der Leyen. When Viktor Orbán talks about his aim to "occupy Brussels", he is actually hoping that the grand coalition of the Socialists and Democrats, Renew Europe and the European People's Party can be replaced by a sort of grand coalition on the right, in which the European People's Party can be persuaded to look for coalition partners not in the centre but on the Eurosceptic radical right.

The first necessary step in this strategic plan would be to include Fidesz in a political group (Fidesz has been non-affiliated in the European Parliament since it left the EPP in 2021), most likely the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), with Brothers of Italy and the Law and Justice (PiS) as the two strongest players. But that is just the minimum scenario. It would also be necessary to convince as many parties as possible of the Identity and Democracy group, which brings together even more extreme parties, to join forces. But the real strategic dream of PM Orbán would be to get the European People's Party to move to the right.

However, this is an unlikely scenario for several reasons. First, the right-wing breakthrough is unlikely to happen since all estimates show that a potential coalition of the European People's Party, the ECR and Identity and Democracy could not reach the majority, while the grand coalition of the centre can still expect a result above 50%.

Second, such a right-wing turn would also face serious political obstacles. For example, in Germany it is difficult to imagine the Christian Democratic Union cooperating with the far-right Alternative for Germany on the European stage. It is also highly unlikely that in Poland, Donald Tusk's party (Civic Platform) – a member of the European People's Party – would cooperate with its main rival, Kaczyński's Law and Justice.

Therefore, the most that can be expected now is that the Eurosceptic right may gain some strength compared to the previous term, but this will be far from enough to make them the driving force of European politics. This also means that the sovereigntist turn that the Hungarian government so desperately wants to see on the European scene in 2024 is probably not going to happen this time either.

COUNTRY PROFILE: DENMARK

SUSI MERET, AALBORG UNIVERSITY

As in other European countries, electoral campaigning for the European Parliament in Denmark is always characterized by its slow start. European elections typically attract 50-60% of the Danish electorate, which seems a relatively high turnout by European standards, but it is in fact very low for Denmark, where political and civil engagement are usually robust.

This general lack of interest in European elections can be attributed to several factors, including a limited understanding of the European Parliament's and EU functions, different forms of Euroscepticism, relatively brief EP-campaign periods, and the absence of high-profile political figures running for EP-election.

The trend of low voter turnout is expected to continue this year, despite several factors that previously boosted voter interest in 2019. These included the proximity of the elections to the national parliamentary vote and the prioritisation of environmental and climate change issues, which resonated with the typically less-engaged younger cohorts of voters.

However, the current political landscape has shifted significantly in the past 5 years. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical tensions from the Russian-Ukraine and the Israel-Palestine conflicts – coupled with political developments at a national level, have reshaped European political dynamics and agendas, contributing to a surge in far-right support across the continent.

Danish politics, particularly among the far right, have become increasingly fragmented, volatile and prone to radicalisation over the past five years. This radicalisation is partly due to the mainstreaming of anti-immigration and nativist positions, which were traditionally espoused by the far-right, but have now permeated the broader right-wing and even left-wing political discourse.

The Danish People's Party (DPP) is the most well known among the far-right parties in



Photo: Finn Årup Nielsen

parliament running for the EP-elections. The party, generally categorised as radical right, populist and nativist, has existed since 1995, but has lost significant electoral support in recent years. Recent polls give the DPP only 4 percent, but the party generally fares better at EP elections.

Within the EP, the DPP is today represented by MEP Anders Vistisen, who is re-standing for the 2024-2029 period and is affiliated with the Identity and Democracy bloc of the EP. The DPP calls for a total halt to immigration from the Middle East and Africa, and “for putting an end to all special demands by Muslims”. Besides making regular use of the slogan “Danish First!”, the party wants Denmark to withdraw from the Schengen Agreement, to reinstate a permanent and effective border control, and a stop to further EU-enlargement, particularly in the case of countries with large Muslim population, such as Turkey, Albania, and North Macedonia.

The party also claims there is a need to scale back the reach of the EU and to safeguard national sovereignty. This means the retention of the Danish opt-outs, and calls for the addition of a new specific one concerning the welfare state. On gender equality issues, the party is against what it calls “gender ideology” and “wokeness”, but acknowledges LGB-rights and is not against the abortion law.

Another notable far-right party, Denmark’s Democrats (DD), established in 2022 by former Liberal party MP Inger Støjberg – who was convicted in 2021 for illegally separating underage asylum seeker couples – promises further hardline stances. The party, which includes several former DPP members, competes directly with the DPP in the far-right arena and is participating in the European Parliament elections for the first time, advocating for reduced EU influence and stricter national sovereignty.

Opinion polls place the party between 9-10 percent, which would provide them with one MEP. If elected, the party’s main MEP candidate, Kristoffer Hjort Storm, will join the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The DD contends all spontaneous asylum seekers coming to Europe should be transferred to a non-Schengen third-country and to allow this it will be necessary to review the content of existing international conventions. Also, the DD asks for “less EU” and more national sovereignty and is fundamentally against any further enlargement and political integration within the EU.

Both DPP and DD emphasise scaling back EU-led environmental policies, advocating that



Inger Støjberg Photo: Annika Haas

Denmark has already contributed sufficiently to carbon reduction efforts and should not pursue further aggressive climate actions that could adversely impact the national interest.

These positions reflect broader concerns among far-right groups in Denmark, besides issues concerning EU integration, immigration and asylum and enlargement policies. Another topic is economic and military aid to Ukraine. In contrast with some of their European far-right counterparts, who may hold more or less overt pro-Russian views, the DD and DPP share decidedly pro-Ukraine and also pro-Israel positions.

As Denmark heads into the European Parliament elections, recent dynamics within the far-right highlight the complex interplay between national developments within the mainstream parties and EU positioning. The outcome of these elections will signal how Denmark’s evolving far-right political landscape will navigate its role, in particular within the varied landscapes of the two main EP far-right groups, and in addressing present and future global challenges.

COUNTRY PROFILE: FINLAND

OULA SILVENNOINEN, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EUROPEAN HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



Finns party in Helsinki.
Photo: Arto Alanenpää

The Finnish far right is facing a tense situation in the upcoming EU parliamentary elections. Just a few months ago, everything seemed to be going smoothly, with the dominant far-right player, the right-wing radical Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset) for the first time showing some interest in EU affairs. With Finland being allocated an additional seat at this election, and with the predicted continent-wide growth of far-right parties, the Finns Party seem more than capable of gaining more seats than the two they currently hold.

More than that, the party seemed invigorated to make their gains mean something this time around. They are looking to replace the two once luminous but in practice quite ineffective MEPs they currently have with people who might actually accomplish something. That's why they have told one of their sitting MEPs, Teuvo Hakkarainen, a Finns Party veteran but also a constant source of

public embarrassments, that he would not be accepted as a candidate.

It seemed that the party is no longer treating the EU parliament as a sideshow, mostly fit for eccentrics who might enjoy considerable support among the party faithful, but who were less than useful in the struggle for influence and standing the party is engaged in within domestic politics.

Also, in a move to make itself appear less radical and more capable of cooperating in a union-wide right-wing political constellation, the party has already switched membership from the parliament's Identity and Democracy (ID) group into the somewhat more moderate European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group last year.

The main candidates in this year's election include major party names like Mauri Peltokangas, a party deputy chair and an



MP, who made a name for himself with his calculatedly coarse language intended to convey a sense of earthiness; Sebastian Tynkkynen, another deputy chair and MP, who can thank his frenetic activity on several social media platforms for his continuing presence in politics, and Vilhelm Junnila, an MP and Finland's shortest-serving cabinet minister ever, who last summer rose to international notoriety after having been exposed as a Nazi and Ku Klux Klan sympathiser.

But, since then, things have taken an ugly turn. The backdrop is that the party is currently in the doldrums in terms of domestic support. As part of Mr. Petteri Orpo's right-wing government, the Finns Party has adopted a role as the hardliners unwilling to yield an inch to the trade unions, who are alarmed by the government's job-market policies. These policies are designed to break the backbone of organised labour and enact sweeping cuts to social benefits, which the government is pushing through as part of its fiscal reforms hoping to make a dent in the public debt.

This has led the party to slide in the polls, conducted in Finland with a breathtaking regularity by several pollsters. The bluesy feeling was not helped by Timo Vornanen, another Finns Party MP, who in early May discharged a handgun in front of a Helsinki night club, apparently as a part of a drunken row that had earlier in the night included a scuffle over the attentions of some teenage female patrons of the club. The party did the only thing possible and expelled Mr. Vornanen, but the damage had been done.

Other components of the Finnish far-right political landscape are not faring any better. Participating in the election are two spin-off groups, the Union of Liberty (Vapauden Liitto) and the Blue-Black Movement (Sinimusta Liike), which both have their roots in the Finns Party.

The Union of Liberty tends to harbour those party outcasts who are too fascinated and motivated by conspiracy beliefs to be useful to the mother party, while the Blue-Blacks are an openly fascist groupuscule also optically undesirable to the Finns Party, now bearing responsibilities as a government partner.

Neither of the two has any chance of getting anyone elected, despite the immediate move of the MEP Mr Hakkarainen, ejected from the Finns Party, to join the Union of Liberty as a candidate. In the case of the Blue-Blacks, their political fortunes sunk even lower with the recent Supreme Administrative Court decision declaring their registration as a political party invalid and striking them off the party register.

A confident spring is thus turning into a summer of uncertainties for the Finnish far right in general, and the Finns Party in particular. Combined with the historical fact of the party voter base usually shows little interest in EU affairs there is little cause to be brimming with confidence. Voter turnout on the actual election day will likely decide their fortunes. The Finns Party MEPs in Brussels will change, that's for sure, but how many of them there will be, and whether they will be capable of doing anything more than the previous Finns Party MEPs in preceding terms, remains doubtful.

COUNTRY PROFILE: GERMANY

SIMONE RAFAEL

This autumn, three state elections will be held in Germany's eastern federal states – Thuringia, Brandenburg and Saxony. According to all election forecasts in these federal states, the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) seems to have a chance of becoming the strongest force with around 30% of the votes.

And the voters know what they are doing: the AfD is currently being monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution as a “suspected right-wing extremist case”; the state parties in Thuringia and Saxony, for example, are already listed as “confirmed right-wing extremist”.

The head of AfD Thuringia, Björn Höcke, is one of the most well-known faces in the party. The former history teacher is currently on trial for repeatedly using the slogan “Alles für Deutschland” (“All for Germany”), which was the slogan of the Nazi SA. During the trial, Höcke is trying to talk his way out of it by claiming that, despite studying history, he had

never dealt with National Socialism.

While it would be an embarrassing admission for other politicians, Höcke's fans allow him to get away with it uncritically. From the outset, they have seen the court proceedings as an unprovoked show trial to silence a “critic of the system”. This is just further evidence that many AfD voters have moved away from factual reality.

Compared to this, the forecasts for the European elections seem almost moderate. In the polls, the AfD is in second place behind the conservative CDU, but with only 16% of the votes. In the last European elections, the AfD received 11%. It will therefore still make a decisive contribution to the shift to the right that is predicted for the entire European Parliament.

Worryingly there is no end in sight to the far-right party's upward trend. A major annual youth study has just been published. While the Greens were still the most popular party



among people between 14-19 years old in 2022, it is now the AfD. The problem of populist self-centeredness and the devaluation of others is therefore not solved by demographics.

Incidentally, the young voters all stated that they were “not right-wing”, which also points to the normalisation of far-right ideology in society. After all, racism and hostility towards refugees were the main motivations of respondents who were worried about their own prosperity. In addition, many saw their vote for the AfD as a sign that “something has to change” in Germany.

The AfD’s great luck at the moment is that its voters have never really been impressed by facts. The far-right party is currently experiencing various scandals that would have meant the end for politicians from democratic parties. In April, it came to light that the AfD’s lead candidate for the European elections, Maximilian Krah, had taken bribes from Russian sources. Investigations into Krah – and Petr Bystron, also an AfD candidate who was filmed taking Russian cash – are ongoing. Krah is not only alleged to have accepted Russian money: his employee, Jian G., has just been exposed as a Chinese spy. There is hardly a better illustration of the fact that AfD politicians are completely indifferent to the welfare of the country they claim to care about.

Meanwhile, Krah does not have to fear any consequences: he is simply not allowed to attend the election campaign kick-off event. And even if the party leadership is squirming in the face of the revelations, the permanent media presence due to the incidents before the EU elections will, in case of doubt, benefit the AfD. Visibility rather than content works as well for a party as it does for the AfD – be it on TV talk shows or on TikTok, where the AfD is so far the only German party with a strong presence.

Content will not play a major role for the AfD in the European elections either. As always, the far-right party wants to enter the EU Parliament under the claim “Freedom from Brussels”. This means that the EU should actually cease to exist and be replaced by a “Europe of fatherlands”. This far-right idea is openly promoted and advertised by AfD leader Alice Weidel. Anti-refugee sentiment is another way of generating support in AfD circles.

Admittedly, it is easy for an extreme right-wing party to score points in this area, while democratic parties have to fight over a realistic asylum policy. Democratic parties would be well advised to position themselves explicitly in favour of protecting refugees and to promote the fact that this also has many advantages for Europe to support human rights.



Petr Bystron, an AfD candidate who was filmed taking Russian cash.
Photo: Metropolitico.org

COUNTRY PROFILE: GREECE

DIMOSTHENIS PAPADATOS-ANAGNOSTOPOULOS, SIMEIO

Kyriakos Velopoulos



The forthcoming European elections in Greece this year come against a bleak socioeconomic backdrop. According to OECD and Eurostat, over the last 15 years wages in Greece dropped by 30%, while the cost of living rose steadily. This has made Greece the second poorest country in the EU after Bulgaria.

In this context, according to the polls, New Democracy, the traditional, right-wing ruling party of Kyriakos Mitsotakis is likely to lose as many as eight percentage points compared with its 41% in the July 2023 parliamentary elections. The losses will not go towards the second party, Syriza, recently led by the Greek-American former businessman Stefanos Kasselakis (the party is expected to stay at 13-15%), but mainly to the far-right Greek

Solution. This party is led by a businessman and TV journalist Kyriakos Velopoulos; a nationalist politician from northern Greece who has repeatedly questioned the usefulness of vaccines against COVID-19. In polls for the European elections, Hellenic Solution is consistently above 9%, while it is possible that it will place second in several cities in northern Greece.

From 2007 to 2012, Velopoulos was an MP for the Popular Orthodox Rally, a far-right party led by George Karatzaferis, which contributed significantly to the normalisation of the far-right in Greece after the 1967-1974 dictatorship (two leading ministers of the current government – Makis Voridis, a former collaborator of Jean-Marie Le Pen, and Adonis

Georgiades – are descended from this party).

In 2011, Velopoulos supported the three-party coalition government of New Democracy, PASOK and the Popular Orthodox Rally, led by the central banker Loukas Papademos. This government took painful measures to deal with the public debt, such as private sector involvement in the reserves of social security funds, a development that proved to be a catalyst for the rise in influence of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

A year later, however, Velopoulos voted against the country's second Memorandum of Understanding with the troika of institutional lenders (IMF, ECB, European Commission), while in 2017 he attempted to capitalise on the large nationalist demonstrations against the Prespa Agreement, and managed to get elected as a member of the European Parliament with Greek Solution. The Agreement included the recognition of Macedonian as a language, establishing the neighbour country's name as Northern Macedonia.

The party implements a “triangular” policy: extreme nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-feminist, conspiracy and anti-LGBT positions, on the model of the European Conservative and Reformist parties, where it belongs – and, at the same time, positions that mimic the traditional left agenda in economic and social issues.

The main competitor of the Greek Solution is the party “Niki” (Victory), led by a northern Greek teacher, Dimitris Natsios; the party is expected to elect one MEP. Niki led the opposition to the marriage equality bill, putting forward a tough “anti-woke” agenda in an attempt to politically represent initiatives by church leaders against the bill across Greece. Although the bill passed with a broad majority, and the mobilisations against it were ultimately rather anaemic (in no way comparable to the protests against vaccines and the Prespa Agreement, the most important “movement” moments of the Greek far-right in the last decade), the opposition to LGBT rights was an important opportunity for all components of the Greek far-right, and certainly for Niki, to renew their anti-government politics.

A third competitor is the party “Patriots”, led by the businessman Prodromos Emfietzoglou. On April 30th, Ilias Kasidiaris declared his support to the “Patriots” and the ex-surgeon Charalampos Giotis, a Patriots candidate.

Faced with the serious possibility that the far-right may record a cumulative percentage of more than 15-16% (given the presence of many

smaller far-right formations), New Democracy's efforts to deal with the leakage to the right are on three levels.

The first concerns efforts to exclude the Spartans, the party of Vassilis Stigas, a party that in July 2023 had recorded 4.68% in the elections, thanks to the public support of the incarcerated neo-Nazi Elias Kasidiaris, a former Golden Dawn MP. New Democracy, along with PASOK and New Left (a left-wing split of SYRIZA) filed a petition to the country's highest court, the Supreme Court, in which they demanded, and eventually succeeded in blocking the Spartans because of their association with Kasidiaris.

The second has to do with the promotion of MEP candidates who either publicly adopt the ideological triptych of the '67-'74 dictatorship (“patrice, religion, family”) or represent hardline nationalist positions. In the second case belongs the incarcerated mayor of Himarra, Fredis Beleris, who in 1995 was arrested at the Greek-Albanian border, carrying heavy weapons, and for this reason was associated with the armed nationalist organisation Front for the Liberation of Northern Epirus (Greek nationalists refer to the region of southern Albania as “northern Epirus” which they consider Greek).

The third consists of the approach of the Greek Prime Minister with the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Ieronimos, who recently said “We do neither what Mr. Velopoulos will tell us nor what any politician will tell us.”

Seeing many of its positions adopted by the government or its far-right wing, the Greek far-right is now more normalised than at any time in recent post-war history. It has recognised the “momentum” in the European South – from the victory of Giorgia Meloni (Italy), to the rise of Vox (Spain) or Chega (Portugal), forces we may see in government in the near future.

At the same time, while far-right neo-Nazi violence has been in decline over the last 10 years in Greece, thanks to the trial and conviction of Golden Dawn members, the rivalry between its components now seems to be pushing parts of it into violent differentiation with their opponents. Normalisation of the “moderates”, differentiation of the extremists: this is a spiral dangerous for democracy and the rule of law in the country – the downward trend of which is parallel to that of wages and quality of life.

COUNTRY PROFILE: IRELAND

NIAMH McDONALD, HOPE AND COURAGE COLLECTIVE

Ireland has a long history of racism, bigotry, exclusion and hatred. The Travelling Community, LGBTQIA+ Community and people from minoritised groups have been consistently experiencing structural, cultural and societal exclusion and violence. The strategies and tactics of the modern Irish far right are nothing new to many groups in Ireland. What is distinct and new is the use of conspiracism and the platform social media companies provide the far right to spread their disinformation and fear.

The modern far right in Ireland are weaponising the very real material issues that communities are facing across the country. They are using online platforms as their hate megaphones to drive disinformation, fear and anger towards minoritised people in communities. The far right are successfully baiting mainstream politicians into reactionary positions, creating a chill effect on government policy, resulting in thousands of young men seeking asylum sleeping on the streets of Dublin with no access to water, sanitation or food and vulnerable to attacks from the far right.

There are now increasing calls coming from centre left and centre right politicians and parties for stricter immigration policies. Some in the mainstream media are very happy to use far right talking points as clickbait

headlines driving the normalisation of hatred. Irish politics is now being pulled to the right by a small but very vocal group of far-right extremists and mainstream politicians are allowing them to do it.

THE GROWTH OF THE FAR RIGHT

The pandemic is a useful starting point to understand the current dynamics of the Irish far right. The far right in Ireland had been active in communities prior to Covid-19, but the pandemic saw its real growth and saw significant changes bringing more hostile and violent actions.

The removal of public health measures post-Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine saw the far right pivot back to immigration, nationalism, trans-and homophobia, extreme Christian dogma, and political authoritarianism. With an ever-increasing violent rhetoric and harassment towards politicians, journalists, community leaders, public servants, refugees, people seeking asylum, and people from minoritised communities.

Over the course of the winter of 2022, and into 2023, mobilisations against people seeking asylum emerged in areas across Dublin and then across the country happened almost on a daily basis. They consisted of gangs of



people shouting abuse and threats outside accommodation centres, with threats of violence and arson attacks.

In the spring and summer of 2023, a small number of the religious fundamentalist far right activists focused on the intimidation of libraries and bookshops, part of an anti LGBTQIA+ campaign modelled on international attacks on books and literature. This led to a parallel rise in hate attacks targeting members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

In November 2023, a horrific violent attack towards school children and their caregivers was exploited by prominent far right actors calling people out onto the streets resulting in a riot in Dublin's city centre. Subsequent arrests and charges included activists of far-right groups.

After the violence on the Dublin streets, the dynamics of far-right activity have become more interconnected and increasingly violent. A spate of arson attacks and blockade mobilisations at asylum accommodation centres has caused increased tensions and violence in communities.

2024 began with the continuation of these blockades, increasing arson attacks and in some instances elected representatives of mainstream parties being questioned by local authorities.

As the networks among the far right are deepening and increasingly involved in local anti-migrant organising, they are attempting to establish an anti-migrant national network with three national mobilisations called so far this year with the aim of raising the profile of far right election candidates running in local and European Elections.

IRISH FAR RIGHT AND THE EURO ELECTIONS.

Ireland has four registered far right political parties. None of these organisations hold an elected seat in any of Ireland's local councils, Dail (Parliament) or Seanad (Senate). The last elections held in Ireland were a general election in February 2020 and in total far right candidates obtained on average 1% of the vote.

THE NATIONAL PARTY EST 2016

The National Party was set up in 2016 as an explicit white supremacist extreme right Catholic fundamentalist group. Then led by Justin Barrett, the party has seen significant infighting and a high turnover of membership, while maintaining links with fascist and neo-Nazi groups across Europe. Currently, two factions are vying to be in control of the party.



National Party leader Justin Barrett
Photo: The National Party

They are the most ideologically motivated of all the far right groups in Ireland. Both factions will run candidates under the National Party banner in the Euro elections and in two areas it will run against each other. Both factions remain committed to extreme far right politics.

IRISH FREEDOM PARTY (IFP) EST 2018.

The Irish Freedom Party (IFP) is a far right group set up by Hermann Kelly in 2018, having its roots in the Irexit campaign before officially launching in September 2018. The group was originally called "Irexit – Freedom to Prosper" before rebranding as the IFP and was set up with the aim of emulating the right wing Brexit campaign of Nigel Farage in 2016 in Britain.

At the group's launch in Dublin in January 2019, Kelly promoted the Great Replacement conspiracy theory to the audience and has since pushed it many times on social media. This conspiracy theory is known to have motivated tens of terrorist attacks including the mass murder of seventy-seven people in Norway in 2011, many of them teenagers.

IRELAND FIRST EST 2023

Ireland First is a tiny group formed by Philip Dwyer & Derek Blighe after Dwyer was expelled from the National Party in 2023. In 2022, Derek Blighe was convicted of theft. Philip Dwyer is currently facing charges relating to an incident at a children's creche. Derek Blighe has been a main driver of anti-migrant organising in Cork and surrounding areas of the country, while Dwyer has been a persistent feature of anti-migrant mobilisation across the country. In an Ireland First Telegram group, chat members regularly posted racist and antisemitic messages including a claim that 'Hitler did nothing wrong.' The promotion of white supremacist conspiracy theories such as the Kalergi plan by founder Philip Dwyer puts Ireland First very much in the far right camp.

THE IRISH PEOPLE EST NOV 23

The Irish People is a registered group set up late in 2023 by those involved in orchestrated incidents targeting libraries and bookshops over the past 18 months. This organisation has no shared policies or platforms but runs independents under the umbrella name of Irish People. Irish People have an executive committee of Anthony Cahill, Dave O'Reilly and Jacinta Gibbons. O'Reilly has long been active in Covid-19 and vaccine conspiracy theorising as well as anti-LGBTQIA+ activity.

FAR RIGHT ONLINE INFLUENCERS

Far right influencers are a prominent phenomenon within the wider online networks of reactionary activity, and are central to creating the highly emotive and engaging content that includes both framing and calls to mobilisations. A number of these influencers are now running in the elections for the parties or as independent candidates.

THE EURO AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

Ireland has three Euro election constituencies and can elect 14 Euro MEPs. To date Ireland does not have any MEPs in either of the far-right groupings in the European Parliament.

All four far-right parties have candidates running in each of the three constituencies, except the National Party, which does not have a candidate in the Ireland South constituency, but does have two candidates running against each other in the Dublin and Midlands North West constituencies.

Many of the far-right Euro candidates are also running in the local election polling on the same day of June 7th. All of the far right Euro candidates will have access to a

national platform during the European election campaign and will attempt to create a toxic election environment, dominate the narrative and attempt to create a chill effect across these elections and politics in general.

The far right are all running on similar themes. All are seeking harsher immigration laws that go beyond the new EU migration Pact, use culture wars as a key tool to spread fear and disinformation, are vehemently anti-trans, have a consistent narrative of weaponising Ireland's proposed Hate Crime Bill which has not yet passed through all stages of the Irish Dail. More moderate politicians are now taking up the far-right calls for the bill to be scrapped.

None of the far-right candidates are speaking to or bringing solutions to the very real issues facing so many across Ireland such as the lack of secure public and affordable homes, the cost of living crisis and how to solve the consistent issues facing Ireland's public services.

While it is hard to predict the outcome of these elections for the far right, a new conservative right political grouping of independents has emerged seeking to take votes from the far right and the centre right, using far right talking points with already established politicians in its ranks and a strategy of recruiting high profile media candidates and polling increasing favourable for independents they could easily take some ground from the far right in these elections.

What can be said with certainty is Ireland's political landscape is shifting rightward at a fast pace and with a general election due in less than nine months it is likely to continue to do so.

CONSTITUENCIES

DUBLIN

- Ireland First – **Philip Dwyer**
- National Party – **Patrick Quinlan**
- National Party – **Rebecca Barrett**
- Irish Freedom Party – **Diarmaid Ó Conaráin**
- Irish People – **Andy Heasman**

MIDLANDS NORTH WEST

- Irish People – **Anthony Cahill**
- Irish Freedom Party – **Herman Kelly**
- Ireland First – **Margaret Maguire**
- National Party – **James Reynolds**
- National Party – **Justin Barrett**

IRELAND SOUTH

- Irish Freedom Party – **Michael Leahy**
- Ireland First – **Derek Blighe**
- Irish People – **Ross Lahive**

COUNTRY PROFILE: PORTUGAL

RICARDO CABRAL FERNANDES



The results of the parliamentary elections on March 10 came as a shock to many in Portugal. It was assumed that the far-right Chega party would significantly increase its parliamentary presence of 12 deputies, but it managed to elect 48. Not since 1974 has the far right been so strong in the national parliament.

It managed to do so on the 50th anniversary of the April 25, 1974 revolution, when a movement of young captains put an end to the fascist Estado Novo regime.

It now looks certain that Chega will also get elected MEPs in the next European elections, though it remains to be seen how many. The results will likely consolidate its status as the third most popular party in Portuguese politics.

For decades, the Portuguese democratic system has been marked by bipartisanship, with the PSD (centre-right) and PS (centre-left) alternating in power. As has happened in other European countries, the results of this year's

legislative elections have called bipartisanship into question, with Chega becoming a destabilising force in parliament.

In practice, three poles have been created in parliament: the extreme right (Chega), the right (PSD, Liberal Initiative and CDS) and the left (PS, Livre, Left Bloc and Portuguese Communist Party).

However, it is too early to say that bipartisanship is over in Portugal for good. It will take more legislative elections to prove that the far right has managed to consolidate its electorate. This will be one of Chega's greatest challenges: to transform itself from a party of protest into a party of governance.

In order to win over as many voters as possible, Chega promises everything and anything in its electoral campaigns, with its message of protest making itself felt among the Portuguese electorate. Not counting constituencies outside of Portugal's mainland,

this year's legislative elections saw the lowest abstention rate since 1995: 33.8%. Counting constituencies outside Portugal, it was 40.8%.

It is worth noting that at Chega's last and Sixth Congress, in January 2024, the party's new professionalism was on display. There were no bizarre episodes, no infighting and no advocacy of policies that would brutally shock the electorate (as happened in the past with the advocacy of forced sterilization of women who had abortions).

Instead, political communication was unified and there was an institutionalism that had previously been lacking from the party's events and conventions. The message it wanted to send was clear: Chega is a mature party. However, the great continuity within the party remains the centrality of André Ventura, Chega's leader.

Another trend that has occurred since the emergence of Chega, but especially since 2021, when it elected 12 MPs, is its cannibalization of the democratic right-wing. There has been a clear radicalization of the right, particularly the PSD, in an attempt to contain the growth of the far right, but this strategy has failed across the board.

The ideas and messages of the far right are now normalised in Portugal which has contributed to a significant part of the electorate finding it acceptable to vote for Chega. This is why former PSD MPs have abandoned the centre-right party to join the electoral lists of the far-right party. It happened in the legislative elections and more recently in the European elections: Chega's

second candidate for the European Parliament is a former PSD MP.

The European elections on June 9 will take place in Portugal against a backdrop where the far right has never been so normalised or strong at any time since 1974.

In the 2019 European elections, Chega, which had not yet officially formed, participated under the candidacy of the Basta coalition, but failed to elect any MEPs. The party led by André Ventura was in the early stages of formation and its leader, although he had been a television commentator, was not yet well known among the Portuguese electorate nor had he established international links with his European counterparts – he is now part of the far-right Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament. In addition, the 2019 European elections were marked by heavy abstention: more than two thirds (68.6%) of Portuguese voters didn't vote.

Now, five years after Chega was formed, the European elections will be another moment for it to assert itself as the third national political force. It is almost certain that the far-right party will be the third most voted party and will certainly elect MEPs, it just remains to be seen how many of the 21 will be chosen by Portuguese voters.

Chega will now be represented in local, national and European legislative bodies and the funds coming from the European Parliament will allow the party to grow stronger. International links, particularly with its Identity and Democracy counterparts, will also become stronger.



Photo: Vox España

COUNTRY PROFILE: SWEDEN

MORGAN FINNSIÖ, EXPO FOUNDATION

The main representative of the Swedish far right in the EU election is the Sweden Democrats (SD), the radical-right party founded by neo-nazis and neo-fascists in 1988. After decades of steady growth the SD took an unprecedented 20% of the vote share in the 2022 general election, and since then serves as a non-cabinet partner of the rightist government coalition of Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson. In recent years, it has formally abandoned its pro-“Swexit” (Swedish Exit from the EU) position and its opposition to Nato, of which Sweden is now a member.

After a period of superficial moderation, the SD since the election year of 2022 has been moving in a more radical direction, in terms of policy, rhetoric, and contacts with the extreme right, particularly in the “alternative media” sphere.

Nevertheless, the SD is expected to campaign within the bounds of right-wing, Eurosceptic populism and avoid overt displays of extremism. Its top candidate, Charlie Weimers, has a background in the establishment Christian Democrats party and is considered a moderate voice in the SD.

Migration, border controls and asylum policy will be at the top of the SD’s agenda. Migration has also been polled as the top issue on Swedish EU voters’ minds, which is to the SD’s advantage. The SD’s official campaign slogan is “My Europe builds walls”.

The party is also expected to focus on attacking EU bureaucracy, stressing the importance of sovereignty and “taking back control”, and urging a “review” of the fundamentals of Sweden’s relationship to the EU – without, however, going so far as to call for a Swexit. The abandonment of the Swexit position has opened up the SD to attacks on its right flank, notably the tiny white nationalist Alternative for Sweden (AFS) party which splintered out of the SD some years ago and which is staunchly pro-Swexit.

Being sensitive to attacks on its own embarrassing track record when it comes to inappropriate Kremlin-connected contacts and Russia scandals prior to 2022, the SD has signalled its preference to remain in the ECR group in the EU Parliament, and to keep the more overtly pro-Russian parties of the ID group – such as the AFD, FPÖ and RN – at



arm's length. For the same reason, the SD has stated that it will leave the ECR if the Hungarian regime party Fidesz is admitted to the group.

The most recent poll, taken in April, showed a roughly 18% voting intention for the Sweden Democrats in the EU election $\pm$ less than the 20% they got in the 2022 domestic general election, but more than the roughly 15% they got in the 2019 EU election. The ruling Moderates party is polling slightly better than the SD, with the opposition Social Democrats leading the race.

OTHER PARTIES:

Apart from the SD, a number of tiny parties of varying degrees of radicalism are also running in the EU elections, but are highly unlikely to gain any seats:

- To the right of the SD is the **Alternative for Sweden**. This pro-Russian and nazi-friendly party is expected to focus strongly on a single issue, that of Swexit – a policy for which there is scant support in Sweden. The AFS is expected to hammer SD on their “betrayal” of the Swexit cause and their embrace of Nato, but the party is not expected to take any seats. If they were to enter the EU Parliament they would likely seek to join the ID group. Their top candidate is Klaus Bernpaintner, an antisemitic right-wing extremist and Senior Fellow of the paleo-libertarian Ludwig von Mises Institute in Sweden who has publicly mused about the best way to carry out an armed coup d'état. At a campaign rally held on May 1, the party leader Gustav Kasselstrand publicly burned an EU flag.
- Straddling the increasingly blurred line between far-right and centre-right is the tiny libertarian conservative party **Citizens Coalition (Medborgerlig samling; MED)**, which has political representation in about a dozen of Sweden's 290 municipal assemblies. It stresses issues such as deregulation and “anti-wokeism”. It is not expected to pick up any seats.
- A tiny mainstay of Sweden's conspiracist fringe, **European Workers Party (Europeiska arbetarpartiet; EAP)**, a branch of the LaRouchite movement, is running. It is not expected to pick up any seats.
- Three new micro-parties, all of which emerged out of the anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protest and conspiracist movements of the pandemic era, are running: **Freedom Movement (Frihetsrörelsen)**, **Human rights &**

Democracy (Mänskliga rättigheter & demokrati; MOD) and **Knappptryckarna**.

None are expected to pick up any seats, but their continued existence years after the end of the pandemic points to the enduring politicisation and rising mobilisation of the conspiracist movement in Sweden. This development has been facilitated by the establishment of “the Network”, an informal name for a constellation of extremist media outlets, platforms and conferences that bring together elements of the traditional far right with the radicalised post-pandemic conspiracists in a new fringe alliance.

- A new party – or rather, a loose alliance of freewheeling candidates who operate outside the party system – called **Folklistan** – is also taking part in the election. Folklistan's overall profile appears to be right-wing populist rather than extremist. However, it has a system of “open lists” allowing virtually anyone to use it as a candidacy platform. This has already led to one individual associated with the aforementioned extremist Network to run under Folklistan's flag. It is not expected to pick up any seats, although of all parties running in the election it is the one whose prospects are most difficult to gauge, given the “star power” of some of its candidates – dropouts and *enfants terribles* from other major parties – and the large amount of media attention it has been garnering.
- A tiny Islamic conservative party, **Nuance (Nyans)**, is expected to run but is unlikely to pick up any seats.
- A reactionary Christian party, focused mainly on opposition to abortion rights, **Christian Values Party (Kristna värdepartiet; KVP)**, is expected to run but is not expected to pick up any seats.
- The EU election campaigns are not expected to feature violence, although it cannot be ruled out that the neo-nazi **Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM)** may attempt to disrupt the rallies of other parties, or carry out other publicity stunts, in order to gain attention for itself. On May 1, a public holiday associated with the Swedish labour movement, the NRM – as it has for many years in the past – aggressively disrupted several Social Democratic rallies and publicly burned EU flags, indicating that it sees the present election cycle as a suitable theme for propaganda.



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