

EUROPE CHALLENGED. THE RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE EUROPEAN UNION



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THIS TIME IT COULD BE DIFFERENT

2024 is set to show how much the political landscape in Europe has changed. According to a research study by the University of Amsterdam, 32 percent of voters voted for anti-establishment parties in 2021, a rise from 12 percent in the early nineties.⁽¹⁾ Radical-right parties make up about half of this share and have risen faster than any other group.

Europe has been living with populism for

several decades. It rose where the traditional mainstream parties of centre-right and centre left were losing ground. Populism has a “thin ideology,” mainly focused on fomenting the anger of “the pure people” against the “corrupt elites,” has risen on both the left and right-wing of the political spectrum,⁽²⁾ has hindered and influenced the European Union and its policies, but without challenging its basic tenets and functioning.

The radical-right parties of the 2020s have a more distinct ideological profile than populism. Unlike the extreme right, the radical right

accepts the essence of democracy but rejects its liberalism (minority rights, rule of law, the separation of powers).⁽³⁾ Along these lines, pluralism, the separation of powers, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, and women's and LGBTIQ rights have been dismantled in Poland (by the now defeated government of Law and Justice) and Hungary. Radical right leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban believe that 2024 will be a 'turning point'. Elections in the EU, the US, and elsewhere will mean that 'the global political stage will look completely different.' He sees the wind blowing in his favour.⁽⁴⁾

Recent setbacks in Poland and Spain have shown that the relentless rise of radical right parties is not a foregone conclusion. However, current polling for a number of national elections and for the European Parliament election of June 2024 indicate a strong likelihood of their continuing electoral success. Many radical right parties have achieved voting shares of 20 percent and more. Several have joined coalition governments or have entered into parliamentary support agreements. The radical right is now in or supporting governments in Finland, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Sweden. In the Netherlands, Gert Wilders's PVV may lead a minority government. In Austria, the radical right is expected to perform extremely well in elections in autumn 2024. In other countries they have become the leading opposition group.

A stronger right-wing flank in the European Parliament and a European Council with a greater number of governments involving the radical right could bring about change in the

European Union. The question is what that change may look like.

WHAT THE RADICAL RIGHT THINKS

Following the UK Brexit referendum of 2016, Eurosceptic parties, including the radical right, have seen a certain moderation of positions towards the European Union. Demands for their countries to leave the EU or the Euro have been mostly abandoned. The messy and painful departure of the UK has turned such initiatives into vote losers in electoral campaigns. Whether this shift 'from exit to voice'⁽⁵⁾ represents a genuine change of attitude or just a tactical adjustment may vary from case to case, but their ethnonationalism makes them deeply hostile to the EU. Many of these parties now propagate a "European alliance of nations,"⁽⁶⁾ organized strictly along intergovernmental lines. Some demand a renegotiation of the EU treaties leading to a repatriation of powers to member states, others just reject any further transfers of competencies to the European level or more majority voting.

Aside from a deep antipathy towards the European Union, these parties align with each other in their radical anti-migration sentiments, especially racially or religiously determined. Some, including Alternative for Germany, have embraced 'ethnic replacement' theories. They oppose any significant EU role in regulating these matters as well as international rules such as the Geneva Refugee Convention or the UN migration pact.

They also converge in their scepticism toward climate policies. Some parties have moved away from climate denialism in favour of landscapes of rural nostalgia, such as in France, Sweden, and Finland, but they include many climate deniers among their followers. They have been fomenting the 'green backlash' against the EU's Green Deal and exploiting farmers' protests. ►

(1) <https://popu-list.org>

(2) Cas Mudde (2004), *The Populist Zeitgeist, Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004), p. 542-563.

(3) Cas Mudde (2019), *The Far Right Today*, London, Polity Press

(4) <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-2024-will-again-be-a-year-of-success>

(5) Albert O. Hirschman (1972), *From Exit to Voice. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Harvard University Press.

(6) <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/elections/news/marine-le-pen-reinstalle-le-duel-avec-emmanuel-macron-dans-ses-propositions-sur-leurope>

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- ▶ Another area of convergence among these parties are deeply conservative family values against women’s and LGBTIQ rights. In recent years, these parties have strengthened their international ties precisely around these shared values, through networks such as the Conservative Political Action Network⁽⁷⁾ and the Budapest Demographic Conference.⁽⁸⁾

EU policymakers have drawn comfort from the fact that the radical right was sharply divided by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In Poland and the Baltics, Russia has long been perceived as a threat across the board. In Italy Giorgia Meloni’s FdI-led government commitment to Western efforts contrasted with pro-Russian sentiments of her coalition partners and the Russia-friendly views of earlier Italian governments. But the radical right maintains a critical stance toward US and EU policies, which in their view shares some responsibility for the crisis. A number of parties maintain their open sympathies towards Russia. Sanctions and military support for Ukraine could be affected if the international context changes. Should Donald Trump, as next US President, pursue, as he has promised, a peace deal with Russia, European unity over Ukraine will likely come to an end.

CONTAINING THE RADICAL RIGHT?

The respective nationalism of the radical right has undermined the ability of these parties to influence European politics. In some respects, the radical right has performed below its collective weight. Policymakers in Brussels have been playing transactional diplomacy with radical right leaders in order to reach the minimum common denominators needed to move policy forward. These tactics may have allowed the EU machine to move forward, but do not address the political context in which the radical right has risen.

The Eurozone and migration crises, the pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine with its economic fallout have put great stress on European societies. Some of the measures taken by governments in response to these challenges and at times also the failure to respond to widely shared grievances have eroded the trust of major parts of the public towards the governments. Radical right parties were quick to exploit this alienation and skilfully used social media to further foment anger and frustration.

A major part of the responsibility for the success of the radical right also lies with established mainstream parties. As political scientists Cas Mudde and Jan-Werner Müller have long argued, these parties - fearful of the new competition - started to adopt ideas of the radical right, which as a result gradually became normalized, in some countries even turning into part of the political mainstream. However, their hope that this strategy would help retain their traditional electorate rarely paid off. In practice, extensive research has shown that voters usually prefer the real radical right to their imitators.

IS THE RADICAL RIGHT UNSTOPPABLE?

A more successful strategy to contain the radical right could include the following elements.

First, mainstream parties should remain firm in their commitment to the principles of a liberal democratic society. They should promote respect for the rule of law both on the national and the European level and ensure that the instruments developed by the EU to this end are applied consistently and not subject to transactional bargaining.

Second, a functioning democracy relies on dialogue and compromise. Democratic political forces should therefore engage in dialogue with

all parties that are not racist and respectful of democratic processes and explore the potential of persuasion and socialization.

Third, mainstream parties need to seriously address the grievances that drive voters towards these parties. They need to better explain their policies on migration and climate and make sure that the losers from economic and technological change are not left behind.

Fourth, isolating these parties and keeping them out of government can be a workable strategy in some cases, but will not work in others. When the participation in a coalition cannot be avoided, mainstream parties should ensure that the coalition agreement contains strong guardrails ensuring that the government as a whole, remains committed to democratic principles and European integration.

Fifth, a stronger representation of radical right parties in the European Parliament and in the Council in the coming years might well be inevitable. But they will still be only a minority. If liberal democratic forces work well together and stick to their shared principles, the damage can be contained. ■

(7) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/27/controversial-rightwing-figures-spoke-alongside-liz-truss-at-cpac-event>

(8) <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/meloni-to-be-keynote-speaker-at-budapest-demographic-summit>