THE RISE OF THE FAR-RIGHT IN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

Last month, German authorities detained twenty-five people who have allegedly planned to overthrow the current German government, as part of a far-right extremist group. The detainees included Prince Heinrich XIII, a descendent of a German aristocratic family, who was set to declare himself as head of state of the post-coup government. Former parliamentarians, army officers, and police members were also among those who were arrested. The detainees belong to the Reichsbuerger movement, or the “Citizens of the Reich,” which denies the existence of Germany’s post-World War II Federal Republic. The movement is estimated to have around 23,000 members in Germany, with 5% of them classified as far-right extremists by the country’s domestic intelligence agency. Members of the movement, prior to the arrests, developed an orchestrated shadow government structure, which included an armed military wing and a new cabinet.

While the incident in Germany sent shockwaves across international media outlets, it should not be looked at as an isolated incident within the wider European context. Increasingly in recent years, voters across Europe have turned to supporting far-right parties, whose ideological leanings promote, in one way or another, xenophobic, divisive, and populist views. As these parties have risen to power through different spheres of European politics, their presence has enabled the adoption of far-right principles across the continent’s political landscape, and influenced other parties across the spectrum in the process.

While far-right rhetoric advances nostalgic narratives about a more “glorious” European past to target older demographic groups, it has also attempted to rebrand its principles to specifically target younger generations. This has included identifying what matters to European youth the most, and promoting their common interests in policy proposals, including eliminating taxes for everyone under thirty, offering financial assistance to students, and increasing affordable housing options.

Far-right influence is growing more significantly in countries where notable democratic and ambitious liberalization reforms have taken place, and it is important to understand in depth the kind of impact that this has had in both domestic and international terms. These movements have framed their campaign promises through a savior lens, arguing that their efforts are aimed at protecting the national interests of their respective societies against the political, economic, and social threats of globalization. With significant electoral wins across Europe, especially in the past year, a closer study on the impact and influence of the far-right is critical to understanding the trajectory of the European political scene going forward.

BACKGROUND

In the simplest terms, far-right ideolo-
gies can be characterized by a strong opposition to inclusion. Their public positions have been frequently associated with racism, intolerance, exclusionary nationalism, and authoritarianism. The concept is hard to define because far-right movements do not officially identify as such, given that the term encompasses attitudes that are either unlawful or severely stigmatized, especially in liberal societies. In some cases, far-right rhetoric has incited and justified the use of violence to advance political objectives. Currently, 39 out of 44 European countries have extreme right-wing parties represented in their parliaments. While some of these parties have gained minimal representation in some countries, others have seen major successes, including Italy, Sweden, Austria, and Poland. The far-right are expanding throughout Europe, and ironically, the more mainstream politics have tried to ignore its surge in the past, the more pronounced it seemed to get.

Last October, the Brothers of Italy, dubbed the most far-right government since the fascist era of Benito Mussolini, won the country’s national elections, making Giorgia Meloni the first female Prime Minister of Italy. One of her campaign promises had been to construct a naval barrier to halt the flow of immigration into Europe from the Mediterranean. Around four in ten voters cast their ballots in favor of Meloni, increasing from three in ten in 2013. The success of the Brothers of Italy has served as an inspiration to similar ideological parties throughout Europe. For example, Vox, a far-right political party in Spain, benefited greatly from Meloni’s election. Despite having adopted controversial positions on immigration, gender violence, and diversity, it has advanced enough to become the third most popular party in Spain’s national parliament.

In Sweden, the far-right Sweden Democrats came to power last October as well, and elected Ulf Kristersson as the country’s new Prime Minister. The Sweden Democrats received parliamentary backing thanks to a coalition between the country’s three right-wing parties, the Moderates, Liberals, and Christian Democrats. In the 349-member parliament, the four right-wing parties hold a majority of 176 seats. Like the Brothers of Italy, the Sweden Democrats ran a campaign on anti-immigration policies, in some instances echoing white supremacist narratives as well. Compounding domestic challenges including the cost of living, the energy crisis, immigration, and gun violence led first-time voters in Sweden to further gravitate towards the far-right, with 22% of the votes coming from young people alone. This is because young Swedish voters have actively sought to support candidates that offer practical short-term solutions to their most immediate pressing challenges, most notably through youth-oriented fiscal policies that involve direct financial assistance. Much of their support is anxiety-driven as well, as far-right rhetoric doubles down on divisive fears about how increased immigration will take away em-
ployment opportunities in the country.\textsuperscript{20}

Sweden’s case is set to pose a number of challenges for the EU, as the country took over the presidency of the European Council in early 2023.\textsuperscript{21} The Presidency, as a role, sets the tone and direction of EU-wide policies, many of which have been aggressively challenged by right-wing parties in campaign trails, including by the Sweden Democrats. We are yet to see how these seemingly clashing dynamics will play out during the Swedish presidency, given the increasingly polarized camps within the EU.

It is important to also understand the success of not only far-right parties that have gained political power at the highest policy levels, but also those that have come close to winning but lost by a close margin, as they provide insight into how a significant number of European voters think. Last April, Marine Le Pen, then the President of the National Rally Party, lost the presidential vote against current French president Emmanuel Macron, but still gained more than 41\% of the total votes.\textsuperscript{22} The slim margin represented a narrower difference between the two candidates than in the previous 2017 elections, in which President Macron won by 66.1\% of the votes.\textsuperscript{23}

Similarly in Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a far-right populist party, has had serious gains in state parliamentary elections since 2017.\textsuperscript{24} The AfD is the first openly anti-immigration party to hold seats in the German parliament since 1945.\textsuperscript{25} Austria is also seeing a sharp increase in the appeal of populist ideologies as Austria’s Freedom Party is set to advance significantly in the country’s next parliamentary elections in 2024.\textsuperscript{26} This is because citizens feel that the center-right Austrian People’s Party was not able to effectively manage the coronavirus pandemic, in addition to the corruption scandals leading up to the resignation of the former Chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, in 2021.\textsuperscript{27}

In Hungary, far-right wing parties continue to expand in both size and influence. Despite the election of the first-ever female President in Hungary last March, the appointment has been questioned as an attempt to create the illusion of female empowerment in the country.\textsuperscript{28} Last September, the European Parliament deemed Hungary’s undermining of European values a systemic threat, and listed the country as an “electoral autocracy.”\textsuperscript{29} Lawmakers expressed worries about essential rights that are under threat, such as the electoral process, the protection of asylum seekers, and the independence of its judiciary.\textsuperscript{30} Developments show that far-right movements in Hungary are uncontrolled in nature, mainly fused into debates surrounding migration and social rhetoric based on hatred.\textsuperscript{31} The country’s Fidesz party securing a supermajority in the previous legislative elections has also played a role in further promoting populist sentiments within Hungary’s civil society.\textsuperscript{32}
DISCUSSION

While it is challenging to identify the specific factors that had the greatest influence on the rise of far-right parties in European countries, the perceived and imagined threat of the “Other” features prominently across different branches of national discourse throughout the continent. Various economic policies have also widened the gap between the privileged elite on the one hand, and more vulnerable segments of society on the other, the impact of which has only been exacerbated by both the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. This double crisis has given far-right promoters an opportunity to tap into the short-term fears and dissatisfaction of average citizens. A significant portion of the European industrial working class, which has historically supported conventional left-wing parties, believes that increased migration flows could directly threaten their existing privileges and benefits. This has led to the spread of individualist, disruptive, and racist views across major European cities, including Sweden, Germany, and Poland. Framing immigrants as an economic threat has given far-right parties the ability to position themselves as defenders of the welfare state, and as returning to the native working class, whom the left seems to have abandoned. Voting for the far-right has been significantly influenced by citizens’ lack of trust in left-wing parties to effectively support and "defend" their own citizens, placing more effort into protecting the interests of societies outside their own borders in the name of globalization. This has coincided with the significant rise in immigration numbers in most European countries since the beginning of the century, with a 12.8% increase in Sweden, 13.2% in France, and 24.04% in Austria, posing unprecedented challenges to societal integration, education, and employment.

As the issue at the center of the debate among the far-right is the fear of including and allowing more immigrants into the EU, some countries argue that immigration within the bloc does not pose a direct threat in the same way as immigration from outside its borders does. The latter sentiment is more common in countries like Poland, while Sweden, for example, has called for a complete ban on immigration. Right-wing party support in Europe thus varies among countries for a number of reasons, most commonly because of different views on immigration. As such, non-EU immigration opponents argue that increasing migration flows to Europe threatens their national, and inherently European, identities. Psychologically, when citizens feel that their nation has been taken away from them, conflicts are bound to arise between social groups as they seek to compete for access to different resources such as employment, benefits, and economic well-being. As these sentiments grow, bigger status concerns and stigmas will also follow naturally. Citizens are more likely to adopt radical, counter-cultural views of other groups to feel like they
still belong, especially as they feel socially alienated from the wider population for their views. This provides a breeding ground for divisive sentiments to flourish, and far-right movements to grow, as they target individuals with unsatisfied needs of status and belonging. To reduce the possibility of conflicts among different groups, several European states have implemented a range of measures to increase community resilience, with the aim of promoting tolerance and improving social cohesion. According to recent polls, the AfD in Germany won a quarter of the votes from voters under 25. Recently, the German Interior Minister and Social Democrat Nancy Faeser also announced a 10-point action plan to combat far-right extremism. The strategy calls for both preventative policies and follow-up actions, such as disarming alleged right-wing extremists and enforcing stricter background checks for gun transactions. Eliminating far-right extremists who worked for the government, particularly in the security forces, is another priority. This is because reports have pointed to citizens' fear when using the privilege of far-right extremists in the police and military. Further to this, in 2020 and 2021, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nordic Countries (FES) invited researchers and civil society bodies to partake in a series of online exchanges to strengthen the ties between individuals and organizations to combat right-wing extremism in Nordic countries and Germany. Policy recommendations were developed and adopted through international partnerships to increase the pressure on prosecuting far-right extremists, combat antisemitism, and conduct structural work on fighting all forms of discrimination.

Denmark has also built their crime prevention efforts with a focus on preventing risky behavior across different forms of extremism, further building on existing frameworks and social structures. The Danish Ministry of Social Affairs does not distinguish between different forms of extremism, but targets all violent groups in general. This is rooted in the belief that all forms of extremism are fueled by the same underlying social issues such as unemployment and unequal opportunities, which could be better prevented by a holistic approach. Other European governments make a distinction between responses on local and national levels. For example, the Finnish Ministry of Interior focuses on community-level engagements to combat far-right ideologies, while the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (SUPO) leads on national security. Similarly, the United Kingdom addresses far-right extremism through the Department for Communities and Local Government to empower local authorities to take on this task. As early as 2012, fighting extremism and intolerance was listed as a key element of integration, with a particular focus on far-right extremism.

On the question of representation, individuals who are placed at the center of far-right campaigns are, more often than not, low-income individuals, and
those who are not fully integrated into society and the job market. These voters, which are associated with the perception of relative deprivation and societal decline, are the ones with the increased likelihood of supporting anti-establishment movements. This is because lower levels of social integration, a greater reliance on welfare services, and the belief that resources must be competed for, are all connected with a higher likelihood of supporting far-right parties. Voters who are portrayed as such look for security and a sense of community, and populist leaders frequently profit from social exclusion by criticizing economic and social policies as being biased against nationalists.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The current debate surrounding the perceived dangers of far-right movements in Europe varies on whether their role is defined in terms of ideology or as purely politically motivated behavior. However, scholars and policymakers alike acknowledge that there is no clear definition or standard to determine when far-right actions and rhetoric become tangible threats to the safety and security of societies. As such, there needs to be a clear definition of what far-right extremism constitutes, and how one can differentiate between this phenomenon and peaceful right-wing politics. A better framework, particularly on an EU-wide level, needs to be developed to better understand these developments, particularly through actionable policies to prevent extremist acts on a broader regional and international level.

It is also important to introduce legislative mechanisms that effectively curb the spread of misinformation by all political parties, especially when it could potentially harm and incite violence to secure wider economic or political gains. A coordinated response from European governments, institutions, online platforms, and media outlets should be developed to thoroughly address this issue. Governments need to get to the root causes of the spread of misinformation, including the financial incentives that enable its viral dissemination. The role of education should not be underestimated in this process, as youth need to be better equipped at recognizing inaccurate information, particularly from political campaigns. In order to promote public trust, governing entities should also maintain a professional and impartial approach that represents all segments of society, and not choose policy priorities based on party or ideological positions alone.

As research shows, the way that refugees are perceived as a danger to the European working class, welfare, and culture is a commonality across far-right groups in Europe. For this reason, it is critical to both develop and fund long-term, EU-wide initiatives to support local grassroots organizations and citizen-led programs to advance social cohesion, and to provide much needed social and professional support for newcomers. Lastly, and perhaps the
most difficult to quantify or implement, would be the initiation of an honest and serious continent-wide dialogue on the evolving nature of European identity: who it includes, who it excludes, and who gets the right to determine its parameters.

CONCLUSION

As mounting evidence shows, there is sufficient proof to suggest that the European social environment is swiftly changing towards a much more socially divisive political landscape. Changing social structures and economic challenges alone cannot sufficiently explain the arguably successful rise of the far-right across Europe. Instead, both scholars and policymakers alike are encouraged to observe the competitive dynamics among different parties to better understand the principles governing their influence.

Working class citizens, in light of unprecedented challenges facing Europe, have sought false refuge in language that supports isolationism and protectionism. However, there are several prospects that should be looked at and further understood. If supporters of European integration are to comprehend how to handle this surge in far-right influence and curb its divisive impact, they must first carefully examine the responses of voters and look at what, and who, is missing and neglected in their political campaigns and agendas.

From a broader spectrum, it rests on Europe and the EU itself to confront its own exceptionality, and decide on its wider role within the international community.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES


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