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# A far-right EU?

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For a long time, a far-right European Union seemed inconceivable – the idea of it seemed almost like a contradiction. After all, the far right was nationalist, and the EU stood for the opposite of nationalism and was created to overcome it. Far-right parties could disrupt the EU, but they could not constructively shape it, because they did not believe in European integration in the first place. Today, however, things look rather different.

There are now a number of radical-right governments in EU member states – not just in Central and Eastern European countries like Poland, which, against the background of the war in Ukraine, is widely seen as more influential in the EU than ever before, but also in founding member states like Italy, where Giorgia Meloni became prime minister last October. Even in Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is now level with the Social Democrats in the polls.

## Why a far-right EU is possible

One of the reasons it has been so difficult for many people to even imagine a far-right EU has to do with the way we think about the EU itself and the far right's relationship with it.

We tend to idealise the EU as an inherently progressive or even cosmopolitan project — making it seemingly incompatible with far-right thinking. In my forthcoming book *Eurowhiteness*, I argue that the 'pro-European' tendency to think of the EU as an expression of cosmopolitanism has created a kind of blind spot around the possibility of what might be called ethnoregionalism – that is, an ethnic/cultural version of European identity analogous to ethnonationalism, which is closely connected to the idea of whiteness. In other words, a far-right EU is – at least theoretically – possible.

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At the same time as idealising the EU, we also simplify the attitude of far-right movements towards it – as if they were straightforwardly nationalists who opposed the idea of Europe. In reality, there is a tension within far-right thinking between nationalism and civilisationism. The far right in Europe does not simply speak on behalf of the nation *against* Europe, but also *on behalf of* Europe – that is, on behalf of 'a different kind of imagined community, located at a different level of cultural and political space' than the nation, as the sociologist Rogers Brubaker has put it. In particular, its rhetoric focuses on the idea of a threatened 'European civilisation'.

Another, more practical reason why many could never imagine a far-right EU was the assumption that far-right parties could never cooperate across borders. It was thought that, unlike centrist 'pro-Europeans' who believe in cooperation, far-right parties would end up fighting with each other – and in so far as a far-right EU was possible, it would be one that would return power to member states. Contrary to this belief, however, far-right parties seem to be cooperating with each other quite effectively – and some may even be willing to accept further integration, for example on migration policy, provided it is on their terms.

## Convergence between far and centre right

What is making the idea of a far-right EU come into clearer focus – even more than the electoral success of the far right in individual member states – is the convergence between the 'pro-European' centre right and the Eurosceptic far right.

In the last decade, and especially since the 'refugee crisis' in 2015, the centre right has moved to the right on issues around identity, immigration and Islam. At the same time, much of the far right is moderating its Euroscepticism – or at least reframed its strategy. Many far-right parties no longer seek to leave the EU but want to work within it and transform it – in Albert Hirschman's terms, they are choosing voice over exit. Meloni, for example, has, so far, had a much more harmonious relationship with the EU than Viktor Orbán. Partly a post-Brexit effect, this is seen by some as a triumph for the EU. But in many ways, voice is much more of a problem than exit.

Meanwhile the centre right has moved to the right on cultural issues. The lesson it drew from the rise of populism is that, while opposing the far right – and to defeat it – it needed to take on elements of its agenda. Together, these two trends have produced the basis for a compromise between the centre right and the far right: the centre right would move further to the right on identity, immigration and Islam, and the far right would become less Eurosceptic. (In this respect the AfD is outlier.)

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Thus, when Meloni became Italy's prime minister last year, 'pro-Europeans' seemed to be concerned mainly about whether she would 'behave responsibly on key European issues such as Ukraine and the eurozone', as Timothy Garton Ash put it. As long as she did not seek to undermine the EU's position on either, the centre right could work with her to find 'European solutions' to problems. EPP politicians were even reported to be seeking to 'bring her into a right-wing alliance that would have enough clout in the Parliament and European Council to weigh on the nomination of top EU jobs.'

Traditionally, a de facto grand coalition ran the EU against the opposition of the Eurosceptic far right and the far left. But that is now changing. In 2019, Ursula von der Leyen was elected as European Commission president with the help of votes from Fidesz, which remained in the EPP despite its transformation into a radical-right party. And after next year's European Parliament elections, an alliance between the centre right and the far right could produce the most right-wing European Commission yet.

The compromise between the centre right and the far right is producing a kind of 'pro-European' version of far-right ideas and tropes, centred on the idea of a threatened European civilisation – what I have called the civilisational turn in the European project. How far this far-right takeover of the EU will go will depend on whether 'pro-Europeans' who reject civilisational thinking are willing to oppose it or simply go with the flow to maintain European unity.

In particular, it will depend to a large extent on how centre-left 'pro-European' parties like the German SPD respond. Often in the history of European integration, they have accepted right-wing policies in the name of Europe – or, to put it differently, when they have faced a choice between left-wing principles and the EU, they have chosen the EU. The

question is whether they will do the same again in response to the rise of the far right in Europe.

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**Hans Kundnani**
London

Hans Kundnani is Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House in London. He was previously a Senior Transatlantic Fellow in the Europe Program of the German Marshall Fund in Berlin. Prior to that, the Oxford graduate spent five years as Research Director at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). His latest book Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project was published in 2023.