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Europe's self-proclaimed watchdogs

Right-wing populists are increasingly presenting themselves as the true defenders of Europe. The power of this narrative should not be underestimated

The elections to the European Parliament will take place in a few weeks. Polls predict significant gains for right-wing populist and EU-sceptic parties. It is possible that a window may even open in Strasbourg and Brussels for new political majority constellations. If nothing else, this raises the question of how and in what way these parties are actually 'anti-European'. After all, they are now presenting themselves quite differently: not as opponents, but as defenders of Europe. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán likes to tweet under the hashtag MEGA — 'Make Europe Great Again'.

There are two main reasons for this development. One is banal and motivated by electoral tactics: Right-wing populists and national conservatives across Europe have realised that excessive criticism of the EU and constant conflicts with the Brussels institutions do not pay off at the ballot box. Marine Le Pen did not win the French presidential elections with her announcement that she wanted to leave the euro, nor did Jarosław Kaczyński win the Polish parliamentary elections with his obsessive criticism of the EU. The new model is therefore Giorgia Meloni, who does not want to leave the EU, but rather hijack it politically and change it from within: If you can't beat them, join them.

Secondly, the ideology of right-wing populism has changed. In his book *Identity*, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama pointed out back in 2018 that the left's orientation towards identity politics – with its emphasis on the rights of minorities – threatens to create a deficit of representation and recognition among the majority population. Right-wing populism has pushed forcefully into this gap. It uses the concepts of left-wing identity politics, but changes the direction of its argumentation: Instead of emphasising the rights of minorities, it affirms the right of majorities to recognition, respect and preservation of its cultural identity. Consequently, this means that it not only stylises itself as a defender of traditional national identities, but also as a defender of the historical West and its institutions.

Claimed by the right

This idealised West – whose historical core is Europe – rests on three institutional pillars, according to the argumentation of right-wing populism: the nation, the 'natural family' as the core of society and Christianity. Historically, Europe has become what it has long been – a model of civilisation and a technical and scientific powerhouse of the world – because it has developed political communities capable of acting together with the nations, which would have bundled and represented the cultural identities of the peoples. 'The nation', says Viktor Orbán, 'is the great invention of the West. It is the heart of the free world.'

The second pillar is the 'natural family' of woman, man and child(ren). It is in this basic unit of society that the essential cultural and emotional moulding of people takes place (which, so the argument goes, makes it a particular nuisance for liberalism, geared as it is towards ideological reprogramming). The task of the state is to preserve and protect the family and enable people to have and raise children.

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Thirdly, with the shift towards an identity-orientated discourse, the reference to Christianity has also become stronger. Of course, this reference has a subtext: the accusation that modern liberalism, but also Islamic immigration, threatens this foundation of the Western world. According to Meloni in an interview, the roots in Christianity (but also in Hellenism) distinguish the West from the rest of the world: 'We in the West believe that these principles – freedom, equality, democracy, justice, the encounter between reason and transcendence – are universal, but if we look around us, we have to admit that this is not the case, that these values are characteristic of the culture of a particular part of the world. It is our identity as Europeans and Westerners, as children of classical and Judeo-Christian culture.'

And, of course, populism also claims democracy for itself. This is because a very important aspect of this Christian West, the argument continues, is its democratic character: Democracy originated in the West and nowhere else. It was able to emerge because Christianity stipulates the fundamental equality of people before God. 'Liberal democracy could never have emerged without its Christian cultural foundation', says

Orbán, for instance.

A positive Occidentalism

This idealised West, this civilising European project based on Christianity, nations and families, is currently under threat, the right-wing populists say. It is under attack from an allegedly excessive and increasingly authoritarian liberalism and the Brussels centralisation project. Liberalism, so the argument goes, hates all traditions and traditional institutions; Brussels bureaucratism hates nations and nation-state democracy. With a system centred on Brussels, an order has been created that devalues the democratic participation of citizens, weakens the nation-states as spheres of action and organisation and considerably expands the scope of the power and property elites.

In a speech at the University of Heidelberg in March 2023, the then Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki warned of the danger of the emergence of a European super-state governed by a 'small elite'. 'Politics', said Morawiecki, 'is always about choice. But this choice must be made at the ballot box, not in the quiet chambers of bureaucrats. Do we really want a pan-European cosmopolitan elite with immense power but without a mandate from the voters?' The result would not be a stronger Europe, but a weaker one, which would deprive itself of its sources of strength and accordingly remain below its potential: 'Europe could be much more successful, much bigger, much more developed and much more powerful than its current track record', said Orbán in a speech in 2019.

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Every ideology is an intellectual construct. In its current form, right-wing populism presents itself as a kind of positive 'Occidentalism'. It projects cultural, social and political characteristics onto an idealised 'West' and an idealised 'true' Europe. It thus defines a cultural identity that must be preserved and protected against a civilisational other — modern ultra-liberalism, immigration, Islam. Or, as Meloni puts it: 'I don't want to distance myself from Europe at all, but I want Europe not to distance itself from itself.'

The contradictions of this construct are striking. This wonderful 'West', this idealised Europe, populated by peaceful nations and happy families, never existed. The democratic impulses of the Christian churches have also remained within manageable limits for 2 000 years — both internally

and externally. Nevertheless, the power of the European identity narrative of right-wing populism should not be underestimated. In a world in which economic, geopolitical and cultural-religious antagonisms are becoming increasingly sharply articulated, in which global migration is on the rise and the end of Western hegemony is becoming ever more tangible, the appeal of an identity politics that claims to be 'one's own', European civilisation and its values, should not necessarily diminish.

The core motifs of right-wing populist discourse – defence of Western values, strengthening Europe – are certainly also linked to issues of established politics. The latter also sees the 'European way of life' as being jeopardised — but for completely different reasons than right-wing populism. It is the task of mainstream politics to explain better than it has in the past why its policy proposals are more suitable for defending Europe's values and interests. Against the background of the election results in many European countries in recent years, it can be suspected that the efforts made so far have not been entirely successful. Simply labelling right-wing populists as 'Europhobes' will probably be less and less effective.



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