DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 05.01.2026 | Nils Meyer-Ohlendorf

Fewer walls, more bridges

Calls for firewalls against the far right overlook a key truth: democracy is defended through debate, not isolation

Are far-right parties like the proverbial genie you shouldn't let out of the bottle? When they succeed in escaping that bottle and governing, do they inevitably weaken democracy? Are *cordon sanitaires* and 'firewalls' fit for purpose as metaphorical bottle stoppers? For many social democrats in Europe, the answer is a clear yes. The German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for one, has recently made statements to that effect.

Developments in the US seem to back this idea up. Since his return to power, US President Donald Trump has continually weakened American democracy. He has challenged the results of democratic elections and pardoned rioters who stormed the US Capitol. He has attacked freedom of speech, used legally dubious deployments of the National Guard to undermine political opponents and seems ambivalent on the separation of powers. The Hungarian example, too, illustrates how a far-right government can result in democratic decline.

A case against 'firewalls'

On the other hand, a survey of our other European neighbours casts doubt on this argument. In certain circumstances, it seems, the genie can be put back in the bottle. And when it does escape, this doesn't automatically lead to democratic decline. In Europe, far-right parties have a long history of winning elections and then losing them, accepting their results and returning to opposition. The Dutch PVV, Austria's FPÖ and Finland's Finns Party have all been voted in and then voted out, only to later return to government once more. In Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, far-right parties have been part of governing coalitions for years, and yet, Scandinavia remains perhaps the world's most democratic region. Far-right parties are also currently in government in Switzerland, Austria and Italy – and in some cases, have been for a while – yet these countries have remained functioning democracies.

A strong culture of consensus, a robust civil society, national constitutions and EU membership can act as effective constraints on such governments. The requirement for compromise inherent in coalition government also has a moderating effect — sharing power means having to respect basic democratic principles. This provides a check on hardline demands and explains why far-right parties are often only partly able to put their manifestos into practice. It's thus not uncommon for there to be significant discrepancies between policies championed in election campaigns and those agreed in coalition deals and implemented in government.

Dialogue is seen as necessary, especially when the far right is in government.

Be it historically or institutionally, firewalls are not a good fit for established democracies. In many European states, they don't exist, i.e. there's no taboo around working with such parties in government or parliament or having contact with them. In Austria, Finland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland, far-right parties have been or still are in government, participating in various kinds of coalitions; in some cases, those parties have now been around for some time.

In the Finnish parliament, there are committee chairs from all parties, the speaker is from the Finns Party, and members from left-wing parties have introduced legislation supported by the far right. Finnish civil society also eschews firewalls, with even left-wing sections talking to the far right — albeit not on a regular basis. Nonetheless, dialogue is seen as necessary, especially when the far right is in government.

The situation in France, Germany and Belgium is different. Here, *cordons sanitaires* or firewalls exist in both politics and civil society. But their record in terms of effectiveness has been poor. France's Rassemblement National, Germany's AfD and Belgium's Vlaams Belang may not have been in government as yet, but that's small consolation given that they each have a good chance of forming the next government. They have a strong electoral base and are unlikely to disappear any time soon.

What does this mixed picture tell us?

Firstly, the crude, black-and-white metaphor of the genie and the bottle needs to be replaced by a more nuanced view in which both positive and negative aspects are taken into account. The wider context – including the political system and other actors' strengths and weaknesses – should be central to this more nuanced picture. What's more, far-right parties

can't always be viewed through the same prism. The differences between them are too pronounced – especially regarding their attitude towards their own state, their rejection of political opponents and their stance on Russia – and they are too liable to change over time. Direct and ongoing engagement with these parties is required to assess them accurately. A nuanced view can't be achieved by debating in echo chambers of like-minded people; this can only lead to misperceptions.

Secondly, this re-evaluation is not just an academic exercise; it can play an important role in strengthening democracy. The crude genie-and-bottle metaphor has a polarising effect even among progressives because it reduces complex situations to mere friend-versus-foe scenarios. The problem with this is that we need more debate, not less — especially at a time when societies are becoming increasingly divided. What we need is to build fewer walls and more bridges. A more nuanced picture would also help us to better identify the genuine threats to our democracy. In that sense, it's not about sounding the all-clear over the far-right threat but about giving us a better compass, about more precisely highlighting where and how the far right threatens our democracy. That threat comes not so much from a generalised 'disdain for democracy' as from its specific racist, anti-foreigner or anti-Islamic views or its cheerleading for Trump and Orbán.

At their most extreme, firewalls simply confirm the caricature of a self-contained elite whose main concern is gaining approval from its own side and whose members avoid open debate.

Thirdly, the genie-and-bottle metaphor ignores the fact that, in other European countries, arrangements with the far right have come with strings attached — that collaboration has been conditional on them giving a commitment to democracy. This approach doesn't exclude parties per se; it excludes undemocratic positions. For all the serious issues with far-right policies, there are significant advantages to this approach: it strikes a blow for pluralism, it helps to deradicalise, and it offers parties a strong incentive to moderate their positions. In that sense, it can thus even bolster democracy, which is why any such moderation should be acknowledged and met with critical restraint rather than reflexively dismissed as just pretence.

Fourthly, this re-evaluation would be of great strategic value to progressives, expanding their potential sphere of action. For those behind the firewall, it's hard to comprehend why many voters no longer feel represented by progressive parties and have drifted from left to far right.

If they are to win those voters back, it's essential that they understand the far right's positions and arguments and engage with them in debates. Instead, the approach taken by progressives often involves rejecting those positions and arguments wholesale — purely because they've come from the other side of the wall. The majority of voters want parties to engage directly with the far right, however, rather than simply refusing to talk to them.

At their most extreme – when they involve the kind of contact bans and public sanctions seen primarily in Germany – firewalls simply confirm the caricature of a self-contained elite whose main concern is gaining approval from its own side and whose members avoid open debate. Were the far right to be in government, then such contact bans would become mere performative rituals — progressives would find themselves hamstrung and sooner or later be forced to abandon them.

In summary, the genie-and-bottle metaphor is of only limited value in Europe. In established democracies, maintaining a firewall against undemocratic views may make sense — but doing so against parties that are, in any case, constantly evolving does not. Instead, the guiding principles should be open debate and a broad understanding of pluralism. Taken together, the various examples across Europe suggest that this approach can help to effectively defend democracy. What we need is not firewalls against parties but clear boundaries against undemocratic practices — and more debate rather than less.



Nils Meyer-Ohlendorf
Berlin

Dr Nils Meyer-Ohlendorf is Head of International and European Governance Program of the Ecologic Institute in Berlin. He is co-founder and shareholder of Democracy Reporting International. His work focusses on climate protection, EU and democracy in Europe.