GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

A European Déjà Vu: Addressing the Far-Right Populist Insurrection

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December 5, 2024

The far-right mutation of the populist virus thrives on deepening democratic crises and disappearing common sense. Today's far right promises to restore a feeling of community, but at the cost of rejecting complexity and suppressing diversity and pluralism. Is there a green alternative?

The heart of Europe drowned this autumn under devastating waves of muddy water. Torrential rains from Storm Boris wreaked havoc in Austria, Italy, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania. This natural disaster, however, did not translate into a greater mobilisation of the European public to address its root causes – climate change – or support those who do.

Brown tides

Quite the contrary. Like the water, the air is brown. There are perhaps no more ominous signs of the ongoing radicalisation of the political climate in Europe than the recent electoral successes of Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) – for Germany and Austria are the very places where the demons of Europe once took grip of its destiny and led the world to the gates of hell. Materially and morally exhausted, Europe emerged from World War II promising never to fall prey to fear, hate, and war again. The European Community, then Union, built itself as a project of shared peace and prosperity, against the many ghosts persisting from a history made of blood and horror.

It seems, however, that less than a century after this catastrophe, an increasing number of Europeans no longer partake in this post-WWII narrative. The electoral victory of a far-right party in Adolf Hitler's birth country, where he also made his first political steps, is not trivial. Particularly when the party's current leader, Herbert Kickl, is famous for his dubious taste for Nazi-inspired references: denouncing the *Systempolitiker* ("politician of the system") accused of *Volksverrat* ("betraying the people"), while aspiring to become *Volkskanzler* ("the people's chancellor"). A country that never came to terms with its own national-socialist past, Austria is arguably the European state that first re-opened its doors of power to an openly far-right movement as early as 2000.[1] In his essay "Voyage au bout de la droite" ("Journey to the end of the Right"), French political scientist Gaël Brustier describes the FPÖ model as representative of other far-right movements in Europe: the party built its success on a reappropriation of national identity in response to globalisation and immigration, playing on a loss of cultural values and portraying itself as the nation's authentic defender.

Everywhere in the European Union (and in the UK), the pressure of the far right on the political order is heightening. Small parties that once harmlessly gesticulated on the fringes, shunned, silenced, or ridiculed for their radical proposals and shameful speeches, are winning elections. Worse, the far right is on the rise again in the media, public speeches, general conversation – in minds. Our zeitgeist is one of crisis and discontentment, with many citizens feeling trapped in a reality that does not make sense anymore for them. The far right is riding the wave of a populist insurrection against "the system".

Populism rises as democracy fails

No matter the calls for dykes, firewalls, and other *cordons sanitaires* across the EU, the brown tide is seeming irresistible to some. Votes for European populist parties have more than doubled in the past 30 years.[2] One European citizen in three now votes for anti-establishment political forces. This proportion is only slightly higher than that attained in the European Parliament elections in June: the three groups of the radical right collectively hold 187 seats, comprising 26 per cent of the chamber.

Shouting back at this tide with moral condemnation has so far been spectacularly inefficient. Instead of lamenting the nefarious influence of social media, foreign powers fanning the flames of national discord, and the neoliberal order shipping jobs abroad and cutting through the flesh of the welfare state, we might want to understand why we find ourselves in this predicament.

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All these issues are indeed real. Far-right politicians are media-savvy, and many have found powerful godfathers in Moscow (and even in Beijing, in the case of the AfD). And the social consequences of austerity policies, unchecked trade liberalisation, and ill-prepared energy transition measures have gnawed simultaneously at both trust in the political system and middleclass resistance in the face of cumulative crises.

And yet, the most consequential mutations have happened within the far right itself. First, it has morphed from a reactionary to a reformist force that wants to "fix the system" – even if in some parts of Europe, especially in southern and central nations, it still harbours strong reactionary elements, particularly on women's and LGBTQI+ rights. Second, it has profoundly revised its relationship with Europe and the EU, taking lessons from the Brexit ordeal, the Orbán experience, and the power it could exert from inside institutions – even when some of its exponents still claim their preference for an "exit", or their alignment on Moscow. Third, it has developed a progressive position on social concerns – at least in its rhetoric, as some of its parties maintain a rather neoliberal approach to the welfare state, while others have developed a distinctive kind of "welfare chauvinism" also known as "national preference".

But none of these factors, even in combination, would be enough to explain the far right's rising appeal. Its strength is coming from elsewhere.

If we have to deal with the far right today, it is because all other political families, including the Greens, and the whole institutional and political sphere have failed to address the populist challenge of previous decades. The story is one of profound and deepening democratic crises.

Ironically, the far-right vote resembles the last democratic act of those who haven't completely abandoned the idea of using their ballot to turn the tables and "take back control". While the emphasis of far-right parties has variations – from freedom to patriotic revival, justice, and empowerment – everywhere the mix is the same: reclaiming borders against the external threats that endanger the community. It is the quiet revolution of the working and middle classes.

The populist movements of the early 21st century have built their successes on the failures of current democratic systems and widening cracks in society. A daily plebiscite, democracy is based on the feeling of belonging to a community of shared values. Hence its historically national character, which has

practically enabled it to be built in distinction from, or even in opposition to, other entities, sometimes violently. It is this sense of being together, of a community of values, that populist movements claim to defend. They aim to restore meaning and cohesion to a collective self-proclaimed as “the people”, built around shared codes and common markers: the rejection of the dissolving effects of pluralism and the principles of constitutional liberalism.

Opposed to this collective “us”, rethought in terms of unity and communion, there is “them”, the elites, the clerics whose treachery is demonstrated every day by the way the world moves, the injustices, their superior arrogance of class contempt. Everywhere, meritocracy is facing a backlash. The Brexit campaign and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, provoked a brutal and shocking rejection of culture and experts. Those in the know – the educated, the media, and national and international administrations – were generally disqualified, reduced to the rank of cynical manipulators and illegitimate technocracies.

Before they become far right, these populist movements manage to capture an agonising feeling in our societies: of no longer being in the same boat, of seeing the solidarity we thought we had built up disintegrate. As Bulgarian political scientist and writer Ivan Krastev put it, behind the populists’ denunciation of the elites lies the (not-so-extravagant) fear that the political, economic, and cultural elites governing the country might abandon the sinking ship anytime, just because they can.[3]

The purported enemy of the far right has many, confused, faces:[4] from detached elites to the corporate capture of public means; a media system missioned to protect the interest of the powerful, to the point of helping cover up their lies. And fingers are pointed at not just the legitimate concerns of actual system failures but also the fantasies of hidden agendas supposedly aiming to deprive the people of their freedom or replace the native population with foreigners. From the simplistic to the sophisticated, every shade of conspiracy theory that poisons the public sphere is testament to disappearing common sense. As communities, we share increasingly less. Our public sphere has become a gallery of caricatures, a parody of the rational public discussion that is supposed to be the cornerstone of liberal democracy.

Departing from the conventional sociological approach of politics that often relies on institutional mechanisms, such as welfare programmes or policies aimed at reducing inequalities, French academic and intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon links the personal hardships experienced by individuals to the rise of populist movements. In *Les Epreuves de la vie* (“The trials of life”), he argues that social challenges like unemployment, precarity, discriminations, class contempt, and social exclusion deepen the feelings of abandonment and injustice. Consequently, with the help of social media, some groups and communities crystallise around shared grievances. The feelings that social wounds and personal ordeals are inadequately addressed by traditional institutions fuel growing distrust towards elites and conventional political structures. The rise of the *gilets jaunes* is a textbook case of these new social dynamics. The movement developed into a populist claim for dignity, social justice, and direct democracy, leaving behind the ill-fated carbon tax that had sparked the protest.

Nativism and the rejection of immigration are at the core of the far-right cultural revolution.

Reshaping the political order

Democratic institutions have largely overlooked this mutation, accelerated by the narcissistic tendencies

of a society fragmented and polarised by social media. But what detached, disconnected elites missed, populist movements embraced. They offered a more direct and radical response to these vulnerabilities, contrasting with the complexity and perceived inefficiency of traditional welfare state approaches. As US political scientist Samuel Huntington put it as early as 1974, before turning to his infamously misleading "clash of civilisations" theories: post-industrial politics would see a shift from material to cultural conflicts. In terms of US philosopher Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking Recognition", it was no longer solely a question of "redistribution versus recognition" but of combining both to simultaneously address the material and the symbolic dimensions of social justice.[5]

Largely unprepared for the shift from economic to identity politics – particularly in a borderless and globalised economy with the free circulation of capital and, at an EU level, of workers disenfranchised from promises of redistribution and social justice – social democrats and the Left in general have been the first to take the populist fist in the stomach. Their response to the rise of identity politics focused on discrimination and the politics of recognition has ostracised them from their traditional constituency. Either to their left, but more often to their far right, they found their representation of the working classes heavily challenged.

With some notable exceptions (Spain, Portugal, Finland, and Wallonia in Belgium), the Left either vanished, both quickly (Greece, the Netherlands, Poland) and slowly (France, Bulgaria, Italy), into political marginality or turned into reddish versions of the conservative agenda (Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden). Nowadays, despite social circumstances that should be a boon – low real-wage growth, unhappiness with corporate profits, and a general anti-establishment mood – left-wing parties are struggling. Their message on redistribution is no longer heard nor believed, largely because the agenda on migration has been set by the populist far right and has influenced conservatives. Even in Ireland, the last EU member state still preserved from the far-right advance, the proportion of people saying immigration is one of their top concerns is increasing.

Nativism and the rejection of immigration are at the core of the far-right cultural revolution. These issues have become the EU's most existential threat, endangering the basis of liberal democracies. They have been most effective in radicalising conservatives and even leftists or liberals.[6]

This is where the real cultural and political victory of populist far-right movements lies: in its destructive influence on the centre-right and conservative agenda, particularly on the values of an open society. In Italy, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands, conservatives are either junior partners in a far-right coalition or in government with its support. In Germany, Christian Democrat leader and potential next chancellor Friedrich Merz has taken a very aggressive tone on migration, trying unsuccessfully to suck the air out of the AfD's lungs. In France, the conservatives have been running after the far right on migration and security issues since the early days of Nicolas Sarkozy as Interior Minister in 2002, in the aftermath of Jean-Marie Le Pen's accession to the second-round presidential elections. In *Sous les pavés la droite*, French essayist Alexandre de Vitry lamented the disaggregation of French right-wing culture and its shift from traditional conservatism to a more rebellious, countercultural movement, influenced by far-right polarised and militant politics. Indeed, the weakening of the right is not good news.

A legacy of the French Revolution, the concepts of Left and Right that ought to facilitate our orientation on the political spectrum have always mutated in substance, following historical evolutions. For instance, the idea of nation in the 19th century (leading to the Revolutions of 1848), which used to be left wing, became a strong feature of the Right at the turn of the 20th. But the sense of direction remained: the Left wanted to change things and the Right to keep them as such. The radical versions played on the

measure and pace of changes: the far left keeping the revolution going and accelerating change, even at the cost of violence; the far right restoring the previous order. While right-wing conservatives accept the acquis of the revolution, the historical far right is reactionary.

This reactionary far right has a long tradition of intellectualism and a lineage of writers harbouring nothing but contempt for the era of the masses, democracy, socialism, and all the evils bequeathed by modern times. Thinkers such as Ernst Jünger and Georges Bernanos strongly despised this "revolt of the masses", as Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset put it in 1930. They loathed the industrial revolution and its class-based politics, and both the new Fascist and Nazi movements.

Catholic Bernanos scolding the Spanish Church's alliance with Franco or war-hero Jünger rejecting the Nazi regime are mere examples. Of course, reactionaries have not completely left the political and intellectual scene,[7] but something has been quietly growing in the shadows. In the mid-1970s, the New Right started a cultural revolution. With an avowed Gramscian goal to establish cultural hegemony, European intellectuals picked up the remnants of the reactionary tradition and mixed it up with the identitarian and nationalist right. From the GRECE in France to the Mathias Corvinus Collegium in Hungary, or the more recent Nazione Futura in Italy, and the influential help of US political operative Steve Bannon, various think tanks and political laboratories have expanded the intellectual scope and the political reach of the far right. At the turn of the 2010s, in an increasingly connected age dominated by big data, these ideas gained massive influence through digital strategies.[8] Riding the populist wave, the New Right flourished on anti-system rhetoric, the crisis of political institutions, disillusionment with traditional parties and elites, and its appeal to an electorate in search of a sense of direction.

Any credible left or green alternative must defend the complexity and the pluralism of political action.

Reclaiming sense

The main strength of far-right populist movements is first and foremost the near total exhaustion of the legitimacy of established powers in European countries. The credibility deficit is not limited to the political class. It touches economic, trade union, media, and cultural circles as well. Anything institutional and established has become suspicious.

From experience over recent decades, there is one principle that should be constantly borne in mind: fighting the far right requires countering its tune, not singing it louder. Most establishment politicians across Europe have gradually embraced elements of the populist far-right agenda, while keeping a semblance of moral condemnation of the parties they are mimicking.

But the effectiveness of this charade is increasingly wearing thin. Since the emergence of the radical right, the question has been raised many times: is there a Green answer? On the one hand, resisting the established power and questioning the order of things is necessary. On the other, any credible left or Green alternative must defend the complexity and the pluralism of political action, in sharp contrast to the simplistic approaches that constitute the populist solution to present problems.

The answer is threefold. First comes acknowledging that the far right has now morphed into an autonomous and comprehensive political culture. Subversive and rebellious, "politically incorrect", and aimed at redesigning the philosophical and conceptual order of politics, the populist far right must be met

with a quality cultural offer. It is time for the Left and progressives to revisit their political vision of society and their cultural practices. They need a cultural movement that takes roots in society rather than a representation of it. Progressives must redevelop their association with everyday life and connect to people's experiences and aspirations. They have to put themselves at the service of those who make up "popular education", supporting them and nurturing them. They must reconnect and offer a desirable cultural environment to the many and break away from sociological complacency.

Second is addressing the political weight of emotions. The exploitation of negative feelings – from outrage and anger to despair and fear – increasingly dominates politics. The challenge for Greens and progressives is exactly there: to acknowledge these emotions rather than dismiss or counter them with indignation. Contempt only feeds the never-ending cycle of political violence and abuse. There is an urgency to reach out to those who feel enraged or despondent, address the issues causing their outraged emotions, and offer them a different fate than that blowing the populist wind.

The third element is an intellectual response. The populist far right is questioning, not only in practice but also in theory, the basis of the intellectual and political system that it pretends to overthrow. The response must be delivered with equal depth and ambition. Thinking today goes beyond the academic production of comments. It is about devising the intellectual tools to understand the real, to analyse its dynamics and contradictions, and then sharing these tools. A deep and ambitious reform of education in substance and form is an inevitable and indispensable task. Young people's disenchantment and fear of the future have translated into a concerning level of support for populist far-right movements across the EU.

In the end, it is all about meaning. Our world does not make sense for the majority of its inhabitants. But the populist far right makes sense for many. We may find this an impoverished, simplistic, nightmarish explanation of the world, but it works. There seems to be no need for credible policies when the word is believed. Populist far-right rhetoric has so far proven its ability to resist "common sense" reality checks. It feeds on incoherence, contradictions, and sometimes even the lies of established powers. This is why it works so well with conspiracy theories: it provides its audience with a sense of truth based on distrust for any kind of official statement and the promise of enlightenment from a hidden truth.

Although there are urgent improvements to be made such as protecting, strengthening, and developing fundamental public services, we might find that the problem is larger than policies. The overall challenge is to weave back the torn fabric of our societies – to provide a feeling of belonging to something that gives our lives purpose and meaning. And therein lies the ultimate challenge: producing a positive narrative that can bind the cultural, emotional, and intellectual responses, which the far right has so far harnessed with ill intent, to make sense of the world at both individual and collective levels.

In 1941, as the world was battling the demons born of Europe's darkest fears, Bertolt Brecht warned: "The womb whence the beast came was still fertile." It took a little less than a century to give birth again. Only this time we know we need to take on the beast before it comes of age.

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Published December 5, 2024
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/a-european-deja-vu-addressing-the-far-right-populist-insurrection/