

## The Far Right's Firm Grip on the Mainstream

Article by Jakub Majmurek

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Despite predictions of peak populism, the authoritarian strand of right-wing politics has not lost its steam over the past 12 months. Far-right parties are still winning elections, and even when they lose, they have a deep influence on politics and society. Parts of the centrist establishment and the ultra-rich seem to be playing along.

In Brazil, 2023 began with the inauguration of leftist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva for a third presidential term. His far-right predecessor and challenger in the elections, Jair Bolsonaro – known for his admiration of the military dictatorship that ruled the country for over 20 years, his homophobia, and his climate and COVID denialism – lost the popular vote at the end of October 2022.

But political developments have not ended this well everywhere. While the right-wing tide is not as high as at the time of Brexit and Trump, the far right, with its hostility to the values of liberal democracy, has penetrated the political mainstream and debates, even in established democracies.

### The radical right has managed to mask its toxicity...

In the European Union, the far right has made spectacular electoral progress in France, Sweden, and Italy. While Marine Le Pen was once again unable to beat Emmanuel Macron in the second round of the presidential elections, her party – the National Rally – managed to obtain a record 89 seats in the lower house of parliament in the June 2022 legislative elections. Last time around it won only seven seats.

MPs in France are chosen in single-seat districts in two rounds. For years, this system managed to effectively block the far right with its cordon sanitaire of political parties faithful to republican values. Even if Le Pen's candidates managed to get into the second round, other parties' supporters joined forces and voted against them. In the most recent elections, however, this dam developed serious cracks that may not be mended until the next elections.

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In Sweden's September 2022 elections, a record number of votes were won by the Sweden Democrats (SD), a party founded in the 1980s with roots in neo-fascist movements. With 20.5 per cent of the vote and 73 MPs, SD became the second largest political force in the Swedish parliament. While the SD is not officially part of Ulf Kristersson's centre-right minority government, the fact that the government is reliant on its support means that the party has direct influence on policy-making for the first time. In 2010 the SD won just 5.7 per cent of the vote, meaning that it managed to quadruple its vote share in just four electoral cycles.

In Italy, the new prime minister is Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy (Fdi). The Fdi grew out of another political force – the National Alliance – that was a successor to the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, created directly after the Second World War by allies of Benito Mussolini. Four years ago, Fdi obtained just 4.4 per cent of the vote. At the September 2022 elections the party's vote share rose to 26 per cent, allowing it to become the main force of the Italian right and within the governmental coalition.

The reasons behind such triumphs are quite complex. None of these parties would even dare dream of such popularity if it weren't for their leaders' ability to steer them centreward without losing touch with their more radical base. Or perhaps they just managed to better mask the most toxic aspects of their political identities from their more moderate voters. This was exactly the strategy adopted by Marine Le Pen, who distanced herself from the excesses of her father and went as far as to change the name of the party he created. Giorgia Meloni, however, took this approach to another level. Previously known for her support of the "[Great Replacement](#)", a racist conspiracy theory according to which "native Europeans" are purposely being replaced with immigrants, Meloni has recently made concerted efforts to position herself as a responsible politician and a credible partner to both the EU and the US. These included emphasising the necessity of helping Ukraine defend itself from Russian aggression, thus distancing herself from right-wing politicians with connections to Putin such as Silvio Berlusconi or Matteo Salvini.

### **...but is not able to reign in its authoritarian impulses**

This political makeover turned out profitable for the Italian politician. Not only did it make her more acceptable to Washington and Brussels; it also smoothed the way for her to become prime minister. Meloni's government has maintained an Atlanticist, generally pro-Ukrainian course and has presented a broadly responsible face to the European Union, mainly to ensure a steady flow of EU recovery funds on which Italy's debt-laden economy is dependent.

Domestically, however, the Fdi leader's government has not been so quick to tame its authoritarian, reactionary side. One of its first legislative proposals was a law targeting the organisers of unregistered rave parties. Critics of the proposal pointed out that it could be used to criminalise any spontaneous protest, and social pressure subsequently led to its withdrawal.

Meloni's victory also had an impact outside of the political arena. Her supporters have been emboldened to threaten or use violence against people they consider their political enemies, in particular Italian journalists working on the far right such as Paolo Berizzi. Berizzi has been living under round-the-clock police protection for years since receiving death threats for his work on far-right activism. Following Meloni's victory at the polls, Berizzi commented, "The whole extremist right-wing galaxy has become more confident and feels protected."

Another prominent individual who came under the spotlight of the far right was Rula Jebreal, a Palestinian journalist and activist who holds dual Italian and Israeli citizenship. In response to a tweet by Jebreal recalling Meloni's apparent endorsement of replacement conspiracies during her election campaign, the Italian politician attacked her on social media and threatened to sue. While Meloni eventually decided not to file a lawsuit, Jebreal was flooded by a wave of threats and hate speech.

Meloni's authoritarian instincts can be seen in their strongest form in relation to immigration policies. In her first weeks as prime minister, Meloni refused to allow the Ocean Viking – a ship carrying 234 refugees rescued from the Mediterranean – to dock in any Italian port. In the end France begrudgingly

allowed the ship entry to avert a humanitarian catastrophe. This led to conflict between Paris and Rome, which resulted in France suspending a plan to take in more than 3,500 refugees from Italy.

At the end of 2022, Meloni's government passed new regulations that made life even harder for NGOs helping migrants who find themselves in distress while trying to travel to Europe via the Mediterranean. Activists do not mince their words: the new laws mean that many more migrants will not receive the help they need if they are able to survive their seaborne journeys. Organisations that are caught breaking these rules will be liable for severe punishment, including the seizure of ships used to help people stranded at sea.

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A similar nativist, authoritarian way of thinking has been forced on Kristersson's government by the Sweden Democrats. The Tidö agreement, which sets out the conditions for cooperation between the coalition parties and the SD, stipulates that Sweden's annual quota of resettlement places – available to refugees who have been selected for resettlement in a third country by the UN – be reduced from 5000 to just 900. Permanent residence permits will also be abolished, and public authorities will encourage migrants seen as failing to integrate into Swedish society to leave the country. The criteria required to request Swedish citizenship will become stricter, and the right to family reunion will be limited. Police will also be granted additional powers to fight illegal migration. Human rights defenders fear that this may lead to intensified police harassment of people of colour.

## **Trump's candidates lost, but the problem of plutocratic populism remains**

In the run-up to the US 2022 midterm elections, Donald Trump supported a number of radical candidates who promised they would not allow victory to be "stolen" from him next time around. Luckily, they were unable to replicate the successes of the Brothers of Italy and the Sweden Democrats. The most spectacular defeats were experienced by candidates for top posts offering responsibility for the administration of federal elections, including counting votes and declaring winners.

American democracy still has two sizeable problems to deal with. The first is the Supreme Court, currently controlled by the religious right. The court has already demonstrated that it is determined to use its power to enforce an extremely conservative interpretation of the constitution that is at odds with the majority of public opinion.

This was deeply felt in June 2022 when the Supreme Court overturned the Roe vs Wade verdict, ending the protection of abortion rights by the US Constitution. Access to this right now relies on a ZIP code lottery, with abortion care drastically reduced in conservative states and maintained or expanded in politically liberal states.

The second problem relates to the Republican Party. In a process that began in the Reagan era and gathered steam during the Obama administration, the party has been drifting rightward into openly authoritarian and anti-democratic waters. The process is so advanced that even Joe Biden – a president from the moderate wing of the Democrats who is always willing to work across the aisle – has identified

“Make America Great Again” Republicans as a direct threat to American democracy.

The contemporary Republican Party is a de facto coalition of two groups with a joint interest in curtailing democracy and protecting institutions allowing minoritarian rule. The first is formed from a white, radical right-wing strand of the popular and lower-middle classes determined to protect the US as a democracy of white Christians. This group is ready to limit the freedoms of minorities or migrants and accept authoritarian power structures in order to maintain the status quo. The second is populated by the American plutocracy, which fears extensive democracy that could – in short – result in them paying higher taxes. This conjunction of interests and worldviews forms modern Republican Party ideology, described by American political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson as “plutocratic populism”.

Trump embodied this ideology with every fibre of his being and every moment of his biography. But even if he loses (or refrains from running in) the next election, the influence of this ideology on the party will not simply fade away.

Plutocratic populism gained impressive support in 2022 when billionaire Elon Musk took over Twitter. A former self-declared “centrist” who kept an equal distance from the Democrats and the Republicans and supported candidates from both sides in elections, Musk has effectively declared his allegiance to the populist-authoritarian wing of the Republican Party. Not only has he adopted Trump’s language; he also acts as his ally in the conflict over freedom of speech on the Internet. The reforms he pushed through at Twitter clearly show his willingness to enhance the visibility of radical right content on the platform.

If nothing changes before the next electoral cycle, this means that one of the key social media platforms will become a machine for spreading disinformation generated by the radical wing of the Republicans, for instance by enhancing the visibility of conspiracy theories challenging the legality of Democrats’ electoral victories. This may lead to events even more horrific than those of 6 January 2021, when Trump supporters – incited by the man himself, who was then leaving office – tried to prevent the official approval of Biden’s victory by attacking the Capitol.

### **Three extreme examples**

Perhaps surprisingly, the most dramatic example of the triumph of the radical right can be found in the EU. In Hungary, long-time prime minister and Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán has managed to create something his right-wing allies in Western Europe or the United States can only dream of: a “mafia state” in which state resources are used to generate wealth for high-powered party loyalists. He has dismantled most of the constitutional checks and balances designed to protect citizens from government overreach and subdued all major government-critical media channels. In order to legitimise these changes, the government organises hate campaigns aimed at convincing society that only they are able to protect Hungary from Muslim invasion or the shenanigans of George Soros and other dark figures of obvious origin.

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As a result, Hungary has morphed into something the European Parliament described last year as a “hybrid electoral autocracy”. Even an (unsuccessful) electoral challenge by a united Hungarian

opposition and the EU's decision to freeze a portion of Hungary's cohesion funds – a step in the right direction – have not been enough to overturn the authoritarian changes resulting from a long Fidesz rule.

Budapest has long been a source of envy for the conservative United Right alliance in Poland. The alliance's largest member – the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński – and Fidesz are ideological siblings. While 20 years ago these parties were situated broadly in the mainstream of the European centre-right, they have since shifted to increasingly reactionary, anti-liberal, and authoritarian positions. Just last year PiS attempted to create an international alliance of the far right aimed at Brussels, Paris, and Berlin – including openly pro-Russian political parties such as Marine Le Pen's National Rally. On issues such as reproductive and LGBT rights, PiS is now more extreme than most of the European far right.

Thanks to the relative strength of independent actors in politics, media, society, and the economy in Poland, PiS has not managed to go as far as Orbán. Furthermore, Kaczyński's party is obviously getting weaker and losing its political steam. There now is talk of whether an opposition victory would lead to the long-term political marginalisation of PiS or oblige the party to discard the elements of its political identity that conflict with Polish liberal democracy.

The example of Israel should be a warning. A broad coalition aimed at stopping five-time president Benjamin Netanyahu from regaining power lasted no more than 18 months. Now this controversial politician is back, heading the most radical right-wing government in Israel's history. The price the Likud leader had to pay for regaining power and escaping his conflicts with the law was delivering power over key aspects of the functioning of the state into the hands of extremists.

The position of extremist-in-chief is occupied by Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir. An radical Jewish nationalist accused of hate speech against Arabs, Ben-Gvir had until recently a portrait of Baruch Goldstein – perpetrator of the Hebron massacre of 1994, in which 29 Muslims praying in the Cave of the Patriarchs were shot dead – hanging on a wall in his home. Now Ben-Gvir is heading reforms aimed at increasing direct control of the ministry over the police force.

The coalition also wants to introduce regulations that would allow the parliamentary majority to overturn sentences handed down by the Supreme Court. This would lead to political power being outside of the control of an independent judiciary, violating one of the basic tenets of liberal democracy. The bill passed the first reading in March this year.

## **This wave will not disappear by itself**

Despite good news from places such as Brazil and the US, events in 2022 showed us that the authoritarian, radical right-wing wave is likely to remain a problem for Western democracies for some time at least. Support for the radical right will not dissolve until the parties that were once a pillar of the post-war political order find a solution to their current identity crises or are supplanted by new political forces.

The force of the populist wave will be further enhanced by social stratification, the (perceived) denigration of the lower-middle and working classes, the unequal distribution of the costs of the climate transition, tensions with regard to migration and migrant integration, and the shortcomings of the European project. We can in principle reject the language used by right-wing populist politicians such as Giorgia Meloni, but it goes without saying that the countries of the European South should receive more help with migration from across the Mediterranean.

The strengthening of far-right forces has also been boosted by parts of the centrist political establishment, which either saw them as allies or failed to muster the courage to oppose them. The fact that Orbán was able to create a semi-authoritarian mafia state in the heart of the EU was largely possible thanks to political protection from the German Christian Democrats. In the US, apart from a few praiseworthy exceptions, supposedly centrist Republicans were either seduced by the Trumpian wing of the party or lacked the political backbone to oppose its expansion.

To manage the growth of the far right, we now need democracies that can listen to their citizens and translate their will into policy change – while strongly opposing the political forces trying to undermine the pillars of the liberal order. But political forces that do so are sadly still few and far between.

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