

Sneha Sengupta

The Rise of the Extreme Right in Europe

Is it really possible to protect the climate and borders?



Source: Getty; Adam Maida / The Atlantic

Who are the Extreme Right?

The buzzword for much of the European academic discourse in the last few decades has been ‘Populism’. While Cas Mudde has been able to give a simplified understanding of the populist radical right, the Dutch political scientist is yet to draw clear linkages between this popular electoral group and their take on climate change. The spectrum of right-wing and populist parties ranges from far-right ultra-nationalist parties such as Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, Georgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy, Matteo Salvini’s Lega, and Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom to fascist and anti-democratic varieties such as Golden Dawn in Greece or the Slovak National Party. The mainstream normalization of far-right policies in Europe originated in the mid-1980s and later found a political expression post the refugee crisis of 2014. Much of the electoral success of several far-right parties in Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany, can be credited to the forces of globalization, multiculturalism, and integration. The extreme right centers its thin ideology on populism, authoritarianism, and nativism. These underlying strands of exclusionary and anti-pluralist thought flow into the far-right’s discourse on climate, social rights, and the rule of law.

Convenient Truths

The far-right is infamous for its climate skepticism, as many cast doubt on transnational environmental risks, most prominently the lived reality of global warming. Scholars have thus interpreted such circumstantial evidence to be equivalent to the coming of a post-truth age. A

prominent case in point is the Spanish far-right party VOX, whose MP Francisco José Contreras has reportedly remarked that global warming may ‘reduce mortality caused by cold weather’. The German AfD also outlined in their program that the “CO2 is not a pollutant, but an indispensable component of all life”, and blamed the IPCC alongside the German government for suppressing its positive effects. On the other side of the spectrum lies what Nils Gilman calls ‘Avocado Politics’. It is a phenomenon that repackages the political wishes of the far-right but under the garb of environmental justification. The Manichean worldview of the Nazis is such an example where cultural environmentalism justified much of their race theories. Gilman warns of a welfare chauvinism model that will be adopted by right-wing environmentalists, subsequently emphasizing welfare policies for the ethnically pure and native-born. The idea of ‘green patriotism’ has also been gaining momentum in the diplomatic parlance of a few right-wing extremists pushing them towards environmental conservation but not necessarily climate action. Moreover, one of the main threats to the implementation of the Paris Agreement will be the probable shift of the centrist parties to the climate skeptics club, thereby adopting a reactionary approach to the climate agenda.

What about the Promise of Europe?

As the far-rights attempt to speak in the name of the people, their dominant axis of competition has shifted from a ‘worker v/s capital cleavage’ to matters of identity and integration. Their simplicity of messaging and the ability to instill a sense of community gives the impression that they are the best of all democrats. However, Viktor Orbán’s idea of ‘illiberal democracy’ also presents an alternative approach taken by extreme right-wing populists. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has further created a political momentum wherein soaring energy prices, unemployment, and inflation have given a dangerous push to the rhetoric of a ‘Fortress Europe’. As defined by Lipset and Raab, extremist movements are movements of disaffection. Their appeal reaches the dissatisfied masses who feel threatened by the ongoing societal changes. Political analysts co-relate the failure of many center-right governments in the EU to address wealth distribution, tax justice, corruption, and the rule of law to a growing politics of resentment. The laidback policies of the old status quo parties and their slow response to the rise of bitter nationalism and ethnocentrism have eventually paved the way for the extremists to own the dominant narrative across Europe. Therefore, today European voters have prioritized national identity over issues of global warming, gender politics, and human rights. And the foundation pillars of justice and inclusivity that once drove the European project to success remain on shaky grounds.

Far-right ideas travel back and forth across the Atlantic, and it should come as no surprise that superpowers like the United States and Russia have been feeding into the support base for right-wing extremists. Poland remains one of NATO’s most important allies, and Moscow was an infamous financial supporter of Marine Le Pen’s electoral campaign. Such a game-changing surge in support of hyper-nationalist, culturally intolerant, and eurosceptic parties is a testament

to the xenophobic trends underlying the social fabric of Europe in present times. Consequently, as the extreme right questions the fundamental preconditions of multilateral cooperation, respect for civil and human rights, and a sense of global responsibility, the success of the European dream hangs in question. And while the protection of borders has assumed priority in extreme right-wing European politics, the climate is facing unprecedented consequences of such actions.

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