

Multi-Level Crisis in the Mediterranean Region

Keys to the Rise of the Far Right in Europe

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In mid-2023, Spain was the only country in Europe with a left-wing government, and it was facing an uphill battle to win the elections called for late July.

Germany, Portugal, Slovenia, Luxembourg and Malta were governed by centre-left coalitions. The rest of the countries had conservative governments, some led or supported by parties that were heirs to fascist ideology.

Ultraconservative leaders are proliferating in all countries, spearheading harsher, more authoritarian societies that are more intransigent and less supportive, more economically and socially unequal.

Some of these leaders are backed by a majority of the people. Others have enough support to be decisive in the governance of their countries. Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini in Italy, Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland, Herbert Kickl in Austria, Bart de Wever and Tom Van Grieken in Belgium, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Morten Messerschmidt in Denmark, Leena Meri in Finland, Jordan Bardella in France, Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel in Germany, Sylvi Listhaug and Trygve Slagsvold Vedum in Norway, André Ventura in Portugal, Marian Kotleba in Slovakia, Janez Jansa in Slovenia, Santiago Abascal in Spain, Jimmie Akesson in Sweden and Marco Chiesa in Switzerland all stand out. According to a European Council on Foreign Relations survey, 17% of Europeans voted for one of their political formations in the last elections in their country. In France, this figure reached 18%. In Germany and Spain, it was 15%.

Although legitimate, these votes are the result of a political revolution that is eroding democracy and the

welfare state. As Natascha Strobl, author of *Radicalised Conservatism*, explains, the far right is using the media and the 24-hour news cycle to impose a “permanent state of emotional emergency” on society.

Political events are consumed in real time. Propaganda and indoctrination are the order of the day, unannounced fake news sown by powerful machines that normalize a new way of thinking rooted in fascism.

The consequence is that we lose sight of the common good and the need to preserve it through dialogue and agreements.

Origin and Evolution of Conservatism

Conservatism is an ideology that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries with the nation state. Its social base was the nationalist bourgeoisie who sought to maintain their social and material privileges, the wealth that enlightened liberalism and revolutionary socialism wanted to distribute more equitably.

The conservatives of that era believed that inequality was intrinsic to a functional society. Social hierarchies, into which individuals were incorporated from birth, guaranteed order.

Not all people are born equal. No one is made equal to another. As the Naziphile philosopher Carl Schmitt said, “Equality is desirable, but only amongst those who are born equal.”

There can be liberty without equality or fraternity. The defence of private property is paramount and religious faith is at least as important as human reason.

In the interwar period, this conservative bourgeoisie watched as their world derailed. Emancipation movements proliferated. Feminists and workers were joined, from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, by fascists and National Socialists. Stefan Zweig wrote about this in *The World of Yesterday*. The Weimer Re-

public allowed the rise of an anti-democratic ideology based on a cult of personality whereby the leader was one with the state. To defend the leader was to defend the nation. This mimicry was imposed with a warlike and soldierly dynamic that also served to take on hostile forces. Enemies were created to justify – even with violence – a radical defence of the purest identity, of the non-negotiable principles of the nation.

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Radio and film were the new mass media, disseminators of new ideas. Language was radicalized. Everything was confrontational. Conservatism and fascism joined hands. The social and cultural elite rose up to protect owners from the demands of the masses.

Fascism emerged defeated from World War II. Democracy, respect for the individual, the preservation of his or her dignity and freedom at all costs carried the day in Europe.

By the late 1960s, however, the first sociocultural cracks had begun to emerge in the West. Vietnam was the trigger in the United States; May 1968, in France.

There, the *Nouvelle Droite*, or New Right, arose, a movement that blended bourgeois and post-fascist conservatism. There was no need to create a political party because it established itself in the pre-political arena. Once again, language was the main weapon. It was used not only to persuade, but, especially, to destroy democracy.

Contemporary offspring of that *Nouvelle Droite* in Europe include the Institute for State Policy (Germany, 2000), CasaPound (Italy, 2003), Génération Identitaire (France, 2012) and Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West, better known as Pegida (Germany, 2014).

These groups multiply and thrive online, in the blogosphere, where they work to conquer people's minds with conspiracy theories. During the pandemic, their opposition to containment measures and alternative

discourse on the origin of the virus and the effects of vaccines were notable.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, people who live off their wages have been struggling to make ends meet. Many have succumbed to the radical right's strategy. They feel wronged. They have lost purchasing power and watched as social services have diminished. They do not understand how an increasingly fast-paced world beyond their control works. They believe that technology and globalization have changed their lives for the worse. They distrust a government that does not deliver solutions.

Inequality sparks revolutions because wealth gives meaning to life and poverty takes it away.

Between 2015 and 2016, these outraged people supported Brexit in Great Britain, carried Donald Trump to the presidency in the US, and opposed the massive influx of immigrants and refugees to Europe, convinced that shadowy, deep-state forces were plotting a Great Replacement, i.e. to replace them with people from other continents.

Radicalized Conservatism

Classical conservatism was not fond of revolutions or drastic change. For decades, it had agreed strategic lines with social democrats and trade unions. Bipartisanship became the norm, a conciliation of interests, which, in France, Italy, Germany and other European Union countries, enabled the development of the welfare state. The German social market economy is the best example of this pact-based political culture.

Starting in the 1980s, however, the ultra-liberalism of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan began to chip away at the state. It peddled the idea that government was not the best manager of the common good. Areas such as education, healthcare and transport were more efficiently managed by the private sector. Solidarity was abandoned and individual responsibility, fetishized: every man for himself, even if opportunities are highly unequal.

Social Darwinism, which punishes the weak and favours the establishment, reigned supreme. The moral superiority of those who advance over those who are left behind was accepted. What the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer calls "the brutal bourgeoisie" emerged. During the pandemic, the representatives of this brutal bourgeoisie waved the flag of freedom, claiming

that it was up to the individual to decide his or her degree of exposure to the virus, that no one could force them to be vaccinated, and that the elderly and the sick were expendable. The rational course of action was to keep the economy open. The death of the weakest was a natural consequence and a lesser evil compared to the widespread harm caused by the lockdown and the economy's shuttering.

Consensus was no longer a valid strategy for radicalized conservatism. The best way to achieve power was to create disorder, sow chaos, so as later to emerge as the sole means of salvation

Classical conservatism was lured by these extreme proposals. It accepted the need for an accelerated change. It abandoned the centre, became radicalized, and assumed the alt-right's strategy. Pacts with the left were no longer possible. Everything was confrontation. The social democratic rival became an enemy that had to be delegitimized and destroyed.

The Great Divide

Consensus was no longer a valid strategy for radicalized conservatism. The best way to achieve power was to create disorder, sow chaos, so as later to emerge as the sole means of salvation.

This strategy involves attacking political correctness, feminism, anti-racism, sexual minorities and social inclusion, as well as those who cannot find jobs because they are *lazy*, the marginalized because they are *parasites* on the system, and immigrants because they are coming to *steal* our jobs and social benefits. It also means magnifying differences, driving wedges, declaring cultural war against the *enemies* of the homeland, whether political, social, religious or ethnic groups.

A Manichaeon vision of the world prevails: us against them, good against evil.

By siding with good, radicalized conservatism seeks legitimization. All of its actions, even violent ones, are

legitimate and necessary to defend the country, the social order, from an internal and external threat. In the face of this alleged attack, the moral burden is always on the side of the victim.

It does not matter that the threats are manufactured, because they are useful. They create manufactured problems that can only be fixed by devising manufactured solutions.

There is no need to address real issues or design real strategies for the future. One need only cater to passions.

The Power of Emotion

Emotions trump management, sentiments trump reason. What matters is the narrative, through which the radical leader conveys security and a sense of belonging. History is distorted and myth is manipulated to allay the anxiety of the people, who are no longer content with anything but the absolute truth. It does not matter that it is a lie because lies relieve pain and reality is painful.

The people want to rest, to find shelter from the storm unleashed by the very radical right that now welcomes them with open arms.

The storm is artificial, but it is perceived as real. Perception is everything and the misperception of the facts is so well-established in the political debate that it is passes for truth.

People are plunged into a state of permanent agitation. It is important for them to feel anxious, uneasy, irritated. They need to be outraged. And there is nothing better than scandal to exacerbate fear and dominate the public debate.

There is no need to solve problems or set agendas. It is enough simply to continue to sound the alert for a constant and deadly threat.

Anything will do to stoke outrage, to cause rifts and polarize. Attacks on the left-wing opposition must be relentless and aggressive. They must be blamed and pilloried for the ravages of globalization, low wages, inflation, insecurity, multiculturalism and tolerance.

There can be no room for subtlety or doubt. No time must be given to reflect. Action must be prioritized.

Voters are not spectators. Voting is not enough. You have to be in a state of permanent mobilization. Voters become fanatics, foot soldiers. Everything they do, their every daily act, must be for the cause. The

social mood is radicalized. Tensions must be kept high, exactly where the radical leader wants them. None of this is new. Gustave Le Bon described it quite accurately in his 1895 work *The Crowd*. Information technology, however, heightens the deadly effects on contemporary society.

The Radical Leader

Mobilized, fanaticized voters find respite from their anxiety when the leader, depicted as the only possible saviour, shows them the benefits of enlightened despotism.

Paternalism holds sway and the aggrieved population feels relieved. They accept the leader's curtailment of certain rights and freedoms in exchange for reinforced security and identity.

The leader is good, even if he acts like a bully. It is all right for him to ignore social conventions, to stir up trouble. Nonconformity goes down well. It invigorates. Breaking the rules of the lockdown, going out for beers, is a sign of a new beginning, that another world is possible. It is better to be a rebel than bourgeois.

Far-right leaders are rebels, outsiders. They are not part of any establishment. They do not behave like traditional politicians. They say out loud what others only think.

Ordinary citizens value their proximity, that they speak their language, their brazenness. If the staging is right, the lies and indecency take no toll on them. Nobody thinks they are hypocrites. Only 12% of Trump's claims during his presidency were true or partially true, according to one PolitiFact analysis.

The leader galvanizes the party. The party exists to serve him, not the other way around. There are no democratic structures in radical right-wing parties, no internal bodies with real power. Cronies and external advisors prevail. They set the course and no one dares to contradict them. To do so would be akin to contradicting the boss, dooming you to be marginalized or expelled.

The leader is democratic in appearance only. He defends authoritarianism. He wants elections to be decided by popular acclamation in the town square, not by secret ballot. This is what Schmitt, the foremost thinker for today's alt-right, proposed in the 1920s. He said democracy should not be a system through which the leader can be controlled. He advocated a

popular government without democracy. His ideal leader resembled a messiah. He had an almost religious aura. Hence, he needed neither a party, nor a vote, nor institutions that would limit his power.

The leader of the radicalized right attacks institutions, blocks them when he cannot control them and subjugates them when he has the opportunity. Attacks on the judiciary and the legislative branch are constant when they fail to act in his favour. The public is led to believe that these pillars of democracy are in the hands of a deep, dark state, subjected to networks of unspeakable interests, often woven from abroad.

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The Naivety of the Centre and Moderate Left

Social democracy, the liberal and centrist parties, appeal to morality, decency, the values underpinning the European architecture. These values, however, only exist if they are shared by all.

The far right eschews them. It does not agree with the principles advocated by the fathers of Europe. On the contrary, it views the European Union as a danger insofar as it spreads cosmopolitan ideas verging on atheism that attack Europe's Christian and ethnic roots.

Left-wing identity politics – the possibility for individuals to define themselves, beginning with their biological gender and ending with religion – undermine the identity of the state, national homogeneity. No one can define him or herself in a way contrary to tradition. Moderates believe that fallacies do not take root, that no one can believe so many fabrications, but they are wrong. They are victims of excessive rationalism. They believe that voters reward good managers when that is not always the case. They reward sellers of good emotions more.

Appeals to reason, good governance, even honour, run up against the nihilistic wall of radicalized conservatism.

The cancellation strategy, for instance, only provides more fodder for the ultra-right's discourse. It allows them to exploit victimhood, the feeling that the heroes of the past are being profaned.

Moderates find themselves displaced, cornered by the ultraconservative language that, paradoxically, uses the tools of the labour movement: protectionism, defence of national workers, immigration control, honour and class pride.

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Ultra leaders speak to those left behind by globalization as if they were one of them, even when they later side with the employers calling for free dismissals, twelve-hour workdays (as in Austria) and low wages. They do not emancipate the aggrieved; they subject them to the interests of capital.

Denouncing these inconsistencies and appealing to the moral high ground is of little use in the face of the ever-raging fire of the radical right's dialectical artillery. What can you say when your opponent wants to tear everything down rather than build?

The Media Artillery

The rise of far-right leaders would be impossible without dominance of the media. Steve Bannon, the Trump strategist who amassed considerable influence in Europe's radicalized conservatism (he opened an office in Italy to advise extremists), said the true enemy was the press. "The real opposition is the media," he went so far as to say, "and the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit."

This means keeping up the pressure on them as if in a never-ending electoral campaign. It means contesting every inch of ground, especially on social media. That

is where the terms of the debate are defined, and the marching orders are to keep the waters muddy.

Anything goes to radicalize the discourse: the threat of a terrorist group (even if it was dismantled over a decade ago), multiculturalism, the right to bear arms, religious freedom, control over what is taught at schools and universities, pensions, gender violence and women's rights, starting with abortion. These issues are difficult to deal with, but it does not matter. The key is to trivialize them. The simpler the approach, the greater the impact.

Impact changes mindsets and generates violence. In 2011, the terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, for example, killed more than 90 people, most of them teenagers, at a Norwegian Labour Party summer camp because, amongst other things, he thought Vienna had banned Santa Claus. He wrote that it was further proof of Marxism and the Islamization of Europe. Fake news creates an alternative reality that hides the truth of things and, at the same time, turns people into fanatics, ever on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Far-right media outlets gain a lot of audience and money with this strategy. *The Economist* called it "the business of outrage," and the researcher Sean Illing, "manufactured nihilism."

In the engine room of this media production, the newsrooms of radical-right media outlets are joined by the Russian and Chinese governments.

The European Union estimates that, between April 2022 and April 2023, its citizens and institutions suffered around 600 disinformation attacks. The aim is to distract and confuse, weaken and divide European societies.

These attacks are often generated from platforms controlled by Moscow and Beijing. They use both human and artificial bots to move falsehoods through the distribution chains until they are picked up by a mainstream news outlet. As lies spread four times faster than the truth, it takes an average of 37 hours for the EU's defences to roll out a counternarrative to neutralize the attack.

Election periods are particularly conducive for such offensives, as the 24-hour news cycle accelerates even more, and propaganda gains the edge over news. Every new story triggers an infinite loop of reactions and counter-reactions that leads nowhere.

In *Stolen Focus*, Johann Hari explains that *conflict grabs us more than agreement*. On social media, for example, "we see more bad things than good, more

anger than pleasure.” If you build a solid image of the enemy, even if it is false, you can ascribe all evils to them. Negativity takes hold in a highly aggressive communication framework, where the steady flow of news weakens our attention span and capacity for analysis. Hari is not surprised that “this attention crisis coincides with the worst crisis of democracy since the 1930s.” In any case, this news dynamic yields wealth and power for the few at the expense of the emotional equilibrium and free will of the majority. That is why radical right-wing media are proliferating in both Europe and the US. They are good business and a weapon of mass destruction, capable of blowing the foundations of liberal democracy to pieces.

The right to information is no longer guaranteed. News is a mostly private good – public broadcasters are not the ones bringing in the largest audiences – and it is not easy for the justice system to go after the intentional manipulations and falsehoods.

Without information, people cannot make decisions in their best interest and the government cannot govern properly.

Europe Is a Good Place to Thrive

Nobody wants to emigrate to China or Russia. And to emigrate to the rich absolutist monarchies of the Persian Gulf is to accept a regime of semi-slavery. Europe, like the United States, is the ideal destination for anyone in search of a better life.

Europe is home to 7% of the world’s population, produces 25% of its wealth and accounts for 50% of its social spending. The welfare state can only be sustained by a massive influx of immigrants, especially from Africa, which is precisely what the radical right does not want. But there is no other choice. It is a matter of survival and integrating diversity is part of Europe’s DNA. The largest European economies – the British, German and French – are nourished by the most multiethnic societies. Mixing and pluralism undeniably favour innovation and progress.

In one of its founding documents, the European Union states that “human dignity is inviolable.” Dignity and freedom go hand and hand. There cannot be one without the other. Governments that do not prioritize their citizens’ dignity lose legitimacy and usefulness.

Without legitimacy, politics is not possible, and without politics, post-democratic authoritarianisms win.

Freedom in itself is nothing. Just as wealth does not guarantee happiness, nor does freedom. Today we have more freedom than ever, our rights are more protected than ever, yet even so we are captivated by the type of autocratic leadership proposed by the far right.

Equality is the best path to sustainability and happiness, which is the ultimate purpose of the European Union.

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Equality, however, can only prevail over the far-right discourse if it manages to restore the sense of belonging. There can be no dignity without a sense of belonging. That is why radicalized conservatism insists so much on the nation, its history and customs. Restoring the sense of belonging requires repatriating the jobs offshored by globalization. If the jobs come back, if they entail a high value added, it will be possible to maintain the welfare state and restore the identity and dignity of the aggrieved. It will also be possible to create more egalitarian and better integrated communities, built on universal values that come before politics.

Europe has the social and cultural prerequisites to achieve this. It is a fortunate continent, one conducive to development. Notwithstanding the management problems for a more equitable redistribution of resources, there is a genuine willingness to cooperate. Europeans’ confidence in EU institutions is high, in some countries, higher than their confidence in their national institutions, according to one European Council for Foreign Relations survey.

A century after the rise of fascism, there is nothing preventing the growth of radicalized conservatism from being reversed.