POLIDEMOS

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EUROPE
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*Latest News
on Radical Politics*

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Europe and America

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POLIDEMOS

Centro per lo studio della democrazia
e dei mutamenti politici

Polidemos (Centro per lo studio della democrazia e dei mutamenti politici) dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore promuove e svolge ricerche sui mutamenti nei sistemi democratici, sulle trasformazioni nelle concezioni della democrazia e sulla dimensione internazionale della democrazia. Polidemos promuove la discussione sulla democrazia operando a più livelli: al livello della ricerca accademica, mediante ricerche originali sul tema dei mutamenti democratici, considerato da differenti prospettive disciplinari e con un'ottica multi-interdisciplinare; al livello della discussione pubblica, mediante prodotti editoriali ed eventi pubblici; al livello della più ampia divulgazione, disseminando i risultati delle proprie ricerche mediante iniziative rivolte a organizzazioni della società civile, insegnanti e cittadini interessati.

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Introduction

VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO

This book is based on a collection of essays authored by a group of international scholars who participated to the third edition of the seminar series "Populism and Far-Right", organized in 2024 by Polidemos, the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan.

2024 has marked a pivotal moment in global politics, as two major elections, the European Parliament elections and the U.S. presidential election, took place, shaping the future trajectory of their respective regions and had far-reaching consequences for global dynamics. In Europe, the European Parliament elections held in June 2024 confirmed a trend: Far-right and nationalist parties, although divided, are gaining ground across the continent. There is a deepening rift between pro-European Union (EU) forces and those advocating for greater national sovereignty and resistance to EU governance. Populist Radical-right and Far-right parties capitalized on growing concerns about immigration, economic inequality, and national identity, presenting themselves as the protectors of traditional European values against the perceived erosion of those values by Brussels and international elites. The outcomes solidified the far-right's foothold in the EP, strengthening their voice in shaping EU policies on contentious issues such as migration, security, and economic reforms. At the same time, the results exposed a broader disillusionment with the EU, complicating

its political dynamics and signaling a period of uncertainty in European integration.

In the United States (USA), the 2024 presidential election marked the return of Donald Trump, following a contested race that underscored the deepening political and social divides in the country. Trump's victory confirmed that populism, nationalism, and a rejection of traditional political norms continue to resonate with a large portion of the American electorate. His rhetoric, long centered on themes of (the return to) American exceptionalism, anti-immigration policies, economic protectionism, and cultural conservatism, proved effective in mobilizing voters who feel alienated by the political establishment and threatened by the changing demographic landscape. With Trump the USA is poised for an intensification of these populist policies, which are likely to deepen existing social divisions and heighten political polarization. Trump's victory also has profound implications for America's role on the global stage. As the USA retreats further into an "America First" stance, its relationships with traditional allies and international institutions are set to shift, influencing global trade, security alliances, and diplomatic strategies. The victim will be the US-led post WW2 liberal world order.

While the outcomes of the 2024 European and USA elections have had a transformative impact on their respective regions, it is essential to acknowledge that Europe and the United States are not the only places grappling with the rise of far-right populism and the erosion of liberal democratic norms. Indeed, the political shifts occurring in these two regions are part of a broader global wave of political instability, rising nationalism, and challenges to the liberal democratic order. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, countries are facing comparable dynamics, with the rise of strongman leaders, populist movements, and an increasing rejection of traditional

democratic frameworks. Nonetheless, Europe and the USA remain especially prominent in this global shift, due to their historical roles as defenders of liberal democracy and their central place in the international political system. The rise of authoritarian leaders and populist movements in these two regions signals not just a regional challenge to liberal democracy but also a broader, interconnected global phenomenon. The radical-right and far-right's growing influence in both Europe and the USA points to the possibility of a future where liberal democratic values are under siege, with far-reaching consequences for global governance, security, and human rights.

At the very heart of this political crisis are the personalization of politics and the crisis of political parties: features that clearly emerged as a defining feature of contemporary governance in both Europe and the United States. Transgressive leaders, such as Donald Trump in the USA and various populist figures across Europe, have increasingly transformed political systems into highly personalized forms of governance, with the leader often overshadowing traditional party structures: These leaders present themselves as the sole true representatives of the people, positioning themselves against political elites and framing their opponents as out-of-touch with the needs of the populace. As the focus shifts away from party ideology to individual personalities, political discourse becomes increasingly dominated by the leader's image, rhetoric, and personal appeal, rather than by policy debate. This shift undermines the role of political parties in holding power accountable and formulating coherent policy platforms. Additionally, these leaders often disregard institutional checks and balances, consolidating power within the executive branch and weakening democratic processes. The trasgressivity of these figures, who openly flout established political norms, has become a hallmark of modern populism: anti-establishment figures, promising to

disrupt the status quo. Furthermore, the performativity of politics has come to the forefront, with political actions becoming more about spectacle and media visibility than substantive policy discussion. A media-driven, theatrical approach to politics, appealing to emotions, nationalism, and populist sentiments, is exacerbating the erosion of democratic norms and threatening the foundations of representative democracy. In this sense, the far-right and populist radical-right movements explored in this book are not confined to the USA and Europe; rather, they are part of a global crisis of liberal democracy. Although Europe and the USA. have been particularly visible in this shift, the underlying causes, economic discontent, cultural anxiety, distrust in democratic institutions, and the perceived failure of liberal elites, are shared across many regions of the world. As populist movements rise in both the Global South and the Global North, they challenge established democratic norms and international cooperation. Europe and the USA with their historical prominence in shaping the liberal international order, are particularly critical in this global shift. As these regions increasingly turn inward, rejecting internationalism and prioritizing nationalism, the global political order is being reshaped. Populist leaders across Europe and the USA often share common ideologies, rhetoric, and objectives, amplifying their impact on global political discourse and reinforcing divisive forces in other regions. The erosion of democratic institutions and the rise of nationalist movements in these regions point to a global trend that is reshaping international politics and challenging the international liberal order that has defined much of the post-World War II era.

The far-right's rise in both Europe and the USA has been fueled by economic inequality, and a sense of cultural dislocation among large sections of the population. As mentioned above, the re-election of Donald Trump and the success of far-

right parties in the European Parliament elections in 2024 signal a shift in the political landscape of the West that has been taking place since at least a decade. These movements represent a direct challenge to the liberal democratic order that has characterized much of the post-Cold War era, as they increasingly dominate political discourse and policy agendas. The polarization within societies and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions are not confined to individual nations but are part of a broader global trend that demands attention. What about the future? As populist and far-right ideologies gain traction, they will undoubtedly reshape not only domestic policies but also the relationships between these regions and the rest of the world. The alliances forming between far-right leaders across Europe and the USA have the potential to redefine global geopolitics, with profound implications for international peace, security, and human rights.

Indeed, the political shifts witnessed in Europe and the United States are not isolated incidents, but part of a larger, interconnected wave of populism and far-right ideology that is reshaping the global political landscape. The far-right's rise in both these regions is not merely a transient political moment, but a powerful signal of the broader, deeper, crisis of liberal democracy that spans continents and transcends national borders. The current political moment is marked by a fundamental reordering of the ideological and political structures that have long defined the Western world: From the resurgence of nationalist sentiments to the erosion of traditional party systems, these movements reflect widespread disillusionment with the prevailing political order, an order that many perceive as having failed to address pressing issues such as economic inequality, cultural fragmentation, and growing mistrust in democratic institutions.

These far-right and populist movements are more than just a challenge to the existing political parties and ideologies; they represent a profound shift in the way politics is conducted. The focus has moved from political platforms, policy debates, and collective decision-making to the charismatic authority of individual leaders, whose personal appeal and rhetoric now drive much of the political discourse. This personalization of politics has blurred the lines between leadership and ideology, creating a highly individualized form of governance that undermines traditional democratic structures and processes. The increasingly performative nature of politics, amplified by the media, reinforces this shift, prioritizing spectacle over substance and amplifying nationalistic, anti-elite rhetoric. In this context, political discourse is no longer about thoughtful deliberation or policy compromise, but about projecting strength, defiance, and a rejection of the status quo. The rise of these movements is also part of a broader global trend, where countries across the world are grappling with similar challenges. The factors driving far-right populism are not unique to Europe and the United States. Economic discontent, cultural anxiety, fears about immigration, and the loss of national identity are driving political shifts in countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Yet, the political dynamics in Europe and the USA are particularly significant due to their historical role as proponents of liberal democracy and the international liberal order. As these regions turn inward, rejecting globalism and prioritizing nationalism, they set a precedent that influences political movements around the world, triggering a chain reaction that may destabilize the existing international system.

The consequences of these shifts extend far beyond the national borders, as the alliances being formed between far-right leaders across these regions create a transnational network of populist ideologies that reinforce one another, amplifying

their impact globally. Alliances, based on shared goals such as anti-immigration policies, economic protectionism, and national sovereignty, represent a challenge not only to regional political stability but to the broader liberal international order that has underpinned global governance for decades, with policies likely to disrupt long-standing international agreements on trade, security, climate change, and human rights; the rejection of multilateralism in favor of unilateral decision-making could create a more fragmented and less predictable global political environment, with potentially dangerous consequences for global peace and security. An increasingly divided world where the principles of cooperation and collective action are increasingly sidelined in favor of competing nationalist agendas may be looming, with implications for global governance are profound. Traditional mechanisms of international cooperation, which have helped to address global challenges such as climate change, trade disputes, and geopolitical tensions, may become less effective in an era dominated by populist leaders who prioritize national interests over global solidarity. This shift towards unilateralism threatens to unravel the progress made in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and international security, leaving the world more vulnerable to the forces of instability and conflict.

Ultimately, the rise of the far-right and populist movements in Europe and the United States signals the beginning of a new era in global politics, one in which liberal democracy is no longer guaranteed as the prevailing political order. These movements represent a direct challenge to the values of democracy, freedom, and equality that have been the cornerstone of Western political philosophy for centuries. As these ideologies gain ground, they erode the trust in democratic institutions, creating fertile ground for authoritarian leaders who promise to restore stability by dismantling democratic norms.

This raises crucial questions about the future of liberal democracy not just in the West but globally. How will democracies respond to these challenges? Will liberal democracy survive this moment of crisis, or are we witnessing the beginning of its decline?

In this context, the global political order is at a crossroads. If the rise of far-right populism in Europe and the U.S. is a symptom of deeper structural changes within societies that have been overlooked or neglected for decades, with political and social divisions fueling these movements are not easily resolved, and the challenges they pose to liberal democracy are profound, the future is not predetermined, and we should see what liberal democracy would demonstrate to be resilient.

Structure of the book

In Chapter 1, *Selcen Öner* discusses the concept of a 'New Europe' championed by far-right leaders. Instead of advocating for the EU's dissolution, they emphasize the vision of a 'Europe of Nations,' particularly since the 2019 European elections. Öner analyzes their 'Parochial Europe' vision, the factors shaping the collaboration between far-right parties ahead of the 2024 European elections, and how issues such as migration, foreign policy, and relations with Russia contribute to this evolving political landscape.

In Chapter 2, *Vera Tika* offers a comparative framework for understanding the far-right in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. By employing multiple methodological approaches, Tika examines how historical legacies, political institutions, and socioeconomic conditions shape far-right movements in Southeastern Europe. The chapter distinguishes between radical and

extreme right actors, exploring the ideological narratives and electoral strategies that drive their success.

Chapter 3, by *Giacomo Finzi*, shifts focus to Latin America, exploring the emergence of new populist movements and their connections to the political legacy of the 20th century. Finzi analyzes contemporary left-wing and right-wing populist regimes, examining their structural causes and theoretical underpinnings, and comparing them to earlier populist movements. The chapter also considers the role of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and libertarian ideologies within these movements.

In Chapter 4, *Alexander Reid Ross* examines the legacy of Caesarism as a political concept through the lens of the 2017 controversy surrounding Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at Shakespeare in the Park. Ross explores how Caesarism, Bonapartism, and the politics of personalized authority have shaped contemporary populist movements. Drawing on historical and philosophical perspectives, the chapter critically assesses the interplay between popular sovereignty and dictatorship in modern politics.

In Chapter 5, *Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe* traces the evolution of far-right parties in Germany and Italy, focusing on the intersection of traditional and contemporary far-right ideologies. Cubbe analyzes the historical influence of fascism and Nazism on these parties and examines their adaptation to modern political climates, particularly the rise of populist radical right movements that blend nationalism, anti-globalization, and anti-immigration rhetoric.

In the last chapter *Valerio Alfonso Bruno* explores the influence of the Trump administration and its potential impact on European far-right politics. Bruno analyzes the rise of the Meloni government in Italy and its evolving relationship with transatlantic far-right actors, including figures like Elon Musk.

The chapter examines how external constraints such as NATO, the EU, and financial markets may both hinder and facilitate the rise of a radical political model within the EU, with potential ramifications for the future of European integration.

Finally, we cannot conclude this introduction without acknowledging the efforts of those scholars whose extremely important research and dissemination efforts made both the second edition of UCSC international seminars' "Populism and Far-Right" and this book possible. Genuine thanks also go to all the students and scholars whose valuable participation made the debates both challenging and productive. Finally, a special acknowledgment goes to my colleagues at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Damiano Palano, Antonio Campati, Luca G. Castellin and Samuele Mazzolini who actively supported and contributed the organization.

2024 European Elections and the 'New Europe' of the Far-Right

SELCEN ÖNER[1]

Abstract. In this chapter, the idea of a 'New Europe' of the far-right is discussed. Instead of leaving the EU, most of the far-right leaders have emphasised the goal of 'Europe of Nations', especially since the 2019 European elections. In this chapter firstly, their 'Parochial Europe' vision will be analysed. Secondly, the influential factors for collaboration between far-right parties before the 2024 European elections will be evaluated. While the migration issue brings together far-right parties and even centre-right, especially after the 'migration crisis', their foreign policy orientations after Russia invades Ukraine and their relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, are the main dividing lines of the far-right parties before the 2024 European elections. Lastly, the implications of the result of the European elections and the challenges of the 'new Europe' vision of the far-right for the future of the EU will be discussed.

Keywords: Far-Right; European Elections; 'New Europe'; European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR); 'Europe of Nations'.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the world has been facing increasing global challenges, including the financial crisis, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War, the Israel-Palestine conflict, technological transformation and the challenges of AI. The European Union (EU) has been influenced by these global challenges as well. In addition to these, the EU has been influenced particularly by the migration crisis and Brexit as well in the last decade. After facing these multiple crises, while mainstream parties cannot find solutions to many problems that have emerged, the far-right parties have used this atmosphere to increase their influence in European politics by finding new scapegoats, rather than finding solutions.

After the 2nd World War, most of the extreme right parties disappeared, they had limited success or went underground. In the 1970s with the third wave of radical right parties, radical right became an important political force. At the beginning of the 21st century, a radical right party could be seen in the majority of West European countries. However, unlike Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties, a European alliance among the radical right has been usually not sustainable (Zaslove, 2004, p. 62).

Despite the rise of several far-right parties since the 1980s in some Western European countries, it took almost 20 years until they could be accepted as coalition partners by mainstream parties, especially by the conservative or populist right. The participation of far-right in coalition governments which is a crucial step in the 'mainstreaming' process of the far-right, mostly occurred since the 2000s (Minkenberg, 2013, pp. 17-18).

In this chapter, the concept of 'far-right' is used which is more comprehensive and refers to both the political parties

from the Identity and Democracy (ID) group and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the European Parliament (EP) before the 2024 European elections. After the elections new far-right party groups were formed in the EP.

The electoral strength, parliamentary presence and government participation of far-right parties have played an important role in 'reshaping the distribution of power in European politics'. Wagner and Meyer (2017, pp. 84-85) found empirical support for a rightward shift in European party systems. Mainstream right and left parties have moved to the right. The far-right parties have been in coalition governments, such as in Austria and Italy (Mudde, 2013: 1-19). As Oesch and Rennwald (2018, p. 783) argue, in the 21st century bipolar competition is becoming tripolar. Two dominant party poles of the 20th century are challenged by the third pole which is far-right.

Wagner and Meyer (2017, pp. 91-92) analysed the far-right parties in 17 Western European countries since 1980. They found out that over time all party types have shifted towards 'the authoritarian end of the policy scale'. Moreover, there is a small difference between centre-right and centre-left parties. This process is referred to as a 'right turn', as both mainstream parties and the far-right have gradually shifted to the right.

The far-right parties did not begin as parties that supported conservative positions on issues such as family, abortion and religion. However, they have evolved towards this direction. They claim that Christian values are the core principles of civil society and European civilization. The leaders of these parties mostly think that their support comes mostly from the voters who have more traditional values, especially in terms of family and religion. For that reason, anti-abortion, anti-LGBT, and pro-family policies have become the main focus points (Zaslove, 2004, pp. 74) for many far-right parties.

On the other hand, the European level is considered "both as an independent variable of party change and as an additional area in which parties pursue domestic policy goals and strategies" (Almeida, 2010, pp. 237-238). As Givens (2005, pp. 18-20) argues, despite differences in their historical development during the 1980s and 1990s, the far-right parties have common characteristics, such as their emphasis on nationalism, anti-migration, scepticism towards the EU, and their anti-establishment rhetoric.

Contemporary far-right parties mostly have Eurosceptic positions, especially since the beginning of the 21st century (McDunnell and Werner, 2018, pp. 749). Their level and type of scepticism towards the EU have been transformed especially after Brexit. After the Brexit referendum in 2016, firstly several far-right parties suggested a similar exit referendum from the EU for their countries. However, their rhetoric mostly shifted especially before the 2019 European elections. They mostly started to emphasise that they would become more powerful in the EU institutions and transform the EU into a 'Europe of nations' (Öner, 2022).

As Mudde (2019) argues, the strengthening of the far-right is the most visible aspect of the fundamental transformation of European politics. The European elections in 2019 reflected how much the far-right became mainstreamed and normalized. Although these parties are Eurosceptic, they use the European level to increase their visibility and legitimacy by being part of a political group in the EP. They have been financially supported by the EU as well. Their crucial political figures, such as Marine Le Pen increased their visibility and popularity while serving as MEPs (Janssen, 2016, p. 6).

On the other hand, the cooperation between far-right parties in the EP had been much more limited than other party groups (Mudde, 2007). However, in recent years they have

been collaborating much more with each other. There has been increasing rapprochement between far-right and centre-right as well, especially in terms of their migration policies.

The so-called 'migration crisis' provided a suitable atmosphere for far-right leaders to frame migration as a security threat. By adopting anti-immigrant discourse and policies, they have recently increased their visibility and influence in European politics, as reflected in the results of the regional, national and European elections. The main glue connecting the far-right parties at the European level is their anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, particularly 'securitization of migration', especially after the migration crisis. The governing mainstream parties have also securitized migration as a 'relevant' threat to increase or maintain their votes to cope with the rising influence of the far-right. They have usually copied the discourse and policies of the far-right on migration (Ünal Eriş and Öner, 2021, pp. 187-188). However, the voters mostly prefer the original instead of its copy.

The main common issue for the far-right parties is opposition to migration politically (insecurity), economically (re-distribution of resources), and culturally (fear of Islamization) (Ünal Eriş and Öner, 2021). After the migration crisis, mainstream parties, particularly centre-right parties have increasingly defined immigration as a threat to national identity and security as well (Mudde, 2019, p. 28).

The discourse of 'new Europe' has come to the fore, especially after the elections in the Netherlands in November 2023, in which Geert Wilder's PVV won the elections. To congratulate Wilders, the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini tweeted (November 22, 2023): "Congratulations to my friend Wilders, historical ally of the Lega, leader of the PVV, on this extraordinary election victory. A 'new Europe' is possible..."

In this chapter, firstly the idea of a 'new Europe' of the far-right is discussed. Instead of leaving the EU, most of the far-right leaders have emphasised the goal of 'Europe of Nations', especially since the 2019 European elections. Secondly the influential factors for collaboration between the far-right parties before the 2024 European elections will be evaluated. On the one hand, the migration issue brings together the far-right parties, especially after the 'migration crisis', which led to rising 'securitization of migration' and 'externalization of the EU migration management'. On the other hand, their foreign policy orientations after Russia invaded Ukraine and their relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, are the main dividing lines of the far-right parties before the 2024 European elections. In addition to these, it will influence the rapprochement between the centre-right and far-right as well. Lastly, the implications of the result of the European elections and the challenges of the 'new Europe' vision of the far-right for the future of the EU will be discussed.

1. *European Elections and Competing Visions of Europe*

European identity has been under construction process throughout history and under the reconstruction process within the institutional framework of the EU since the end of the Second World War (Öner, 2011). Contemporary Europe relies on constant negotiations between competing 'parochial' and 'universalistic' visions of Europe (Buhari Gülmez and Rumford, 2016). Various visions of Europe which were put forward by Buhari Gülmez and Gülmez (2020) are still competing in the EU. The main competition is going on between 'Global Europe' and 'Parochial Europe' especially after Russia invades Ukraine. *Parochial Europe* refers to 'Europe of Nations',

"unmaking European integration and transforming Europe along (micro)nationalist lines" and *Global Europe* refers to "blurring the boundaries between European and global visions, thus remaking Europe along universalistic lines".

Thus, many Europes co-exist, interact, influence, and clash with each other during the reconstruction process of European identity. This especially occurs in times of crises, which may be perceived as 'critical junctures'. This 'polycrisis' has made the clashes between different visions of Europe more visible (Buhari Gülmez and Gülmez, 2020). After Russia invaded Ukraine and with the EU's increasing focus on its security and defence policy, the Global Europe vision has become more predominant.

The 'securitization of migration' and construction of immigrants, especially non-European immigrants, as the main 'other' have brought the far-right parties together, especially since the migration crisis. Mudde (2007) argues that the common ideological characteristics of populist radical right parties are nationalism, exclusionism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, a strong state, traditional ethics, and revisionism.

The European vision of the far-right may be defined as 'Parochial Europe'. The far-right parties started to focus on the goal of constructing a 'Europe of nations' (Öner, 2022) after the Brexit process. Most of the far-right parties do not prefer to leave the EU anymore, rather they want to have a stronger presence and influence at the EU institutions and transform it (Kundnani, 2023). However, the AfD is an outlier in this respect. Thus, the far-right has been mainly moving from hard Euroscepticism to softer Euroscepticism.

The supporters of Parochial Europe are usually in favour of restrictive migration policies and a fragmented Europe where nation-states are the dominant actors. In addition to these, the

supporters of Parochial Europe usually resort to xenophobia and Islamophobia.

European elections have provided far-right parties with an additional level to increase their public visibility and mobilize more voters. European election campaigns also give these parties a higher share of media coverage which is disproportionate to their national electoral weight (Almeida, 2010, pp. 243-244).

The first indicator of transnational cooperation among far-right parties goes back to the Eurodroite group of 1979 which was a temporary alliance between the French *Parti des Forces Nouvelles* and the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI). However, the MSI was the only party which could be represented at the EP and they could not form a political group. Rather than incompatible nationalisms or ideological differences, the challenges for transnational cooperation lie in constraints at the domestic level, despite their strongly centralized organizations (Almeida, 2010, pp. 244-247).

Salvini with his ally Marine Le Pen founded the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group which was the most right-wing and Eurosceptic one at the EP in 2015 (Raos, 2018, p. 118). Both Salvini and Le Pen increasingly view the EU as an area in which to advance their respective agendas (*Global Risk Insights,* 2019).

As Almeida (2010) argues, because of the inability of the far-right to form sustainable coalitions in the EP, the potential for Europeanization through cross-national coalition-building remains limited. He added that there was a low degree of Europeanization in terms of their influence in European policy-making as well. Their main strong influence is based on their agenda-setting capability. Especially since the 2019 European elections, the interaction and collaboration between far-right parties have increased while their influence in European politics has increased as well.

2. *Rising Influence of Far-Right at 2019 European Elections*

The contestation between many Europes came to the fore during the European election campaign in 2019 (Öner, 2022). For instance, especially after Brexit, Salvini emphasized the goal of transforming Europe and "taking back Italian sovereignty" instead of leaving the EU. These parties mostly believe that they may have a more suitable atmosphere to realise their nationalist goals within the loose institutional framework of the EU. Thus, the rhetoric and goal of far-right leaders have been revised as transforming the EU by having a stronger presence and influence in the EU institutions and giving back more sovereignty to the member states.

These parties have selectively securitized migration according to their national concerns and their timing of securitization differs as well. For instance, while NR has been nativist and securitized migration from the beginning, the League and AfD have securitized migration after the migration crisis. These parties have securitized especially non-European and Muslim immigrants. The League has usually securitized African immigrants, especially Salvini referred to their migration as an 'invasion' and visualized them as arriving on boats across the Mediterranean, as was frequently shared on his and the League's social media accounts (Ünal Eriş and Öner, 2021). The securitization of migration was one of the main issues that brought together the far-right parties which influence the rhetoric and migration policies of mainstream parties as well.

Before the European elections in May 2019, *Lega* had developed closer interactions with the other far-right parties, especially the NR and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). On 21 January 2017, the leaders of Western Europe's far-right parties met in Koblenz, Germany to fight against the EU's 'neoliberal' doctrines (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017, p. 635).

At the 2019 European elections, the European Peoples Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) lost their combined parliamentary majority for the first time in EU history (Mudde, 2019).

A party group must have at least 23 MEPs from 7 member states. MEPs from Le Pen and Salvini's parties joined forces with other anti-immigration parties to create the biggest far-right group in the EP to replace the ENF which includes the League, National Rally, AfD, FPÖ, Belgium's Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*), Finland's True Finns (PS), and Czechia's Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Deutsche Welle,* 2019). This group became the fifth largest group in the EP. ID increased its presence from 5% of MEPs in 2014 to 10% in 2019. According to Marine Le Pen, although opinions within the ID differ on some issues, there is a consensus on major issues like migration and preventing the spread of Islam in Europe. The ID group was led by Marco Zanni, an MEP from the *Lega* who stated that it was important for all parties with a 'radically different view of Europe' to join forces (*The Guardian,* June 13, 2019*)*. In his victory speech after winning the European elections in 2019, Salvini stated that "not only is the *Lega* the first party in Italy, but also Marine Le Pen is the first party in France… It is the sign of a Europe that is changing" (*The Guardian,* May 29, 2019).

On the other hand, one of the main dividing lines between European far-right parties is their foreign policy approach and their relationship with Putin. Many far-right leaders in Europe, such as Marine Le Pen and Salvini have had close ties with Putin. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the foreign policies of the far-right parties have become one of the main controversial issues before the 2024 European elections.

Before Russia invaded Ukraine, Le Pen claimed that she didn't believe that Russia would invade Ukraine. She added that if she was the President of France, instead of Macron, the

relations with Russia would be much better (*Newsweek*, 2022). After Russia invaded Ukraine, because French public opinion was mostly supportive of Ukraine, Le Pen changed her rhetoric and condemned the invasion. Moreover, Le Pen had to abolish millions of campaign brochures for the 2022 national elections which include photos of her shaking hands with Putin in Kremlin (*Independent,* March 2, 2022). Although Le Pen has been using anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies against especially Muslim and non-European immigrants, she shifted her rhetoric towards Ukrainian asylum seekers after Russia invaded Ukraine.

3. *Binding and Dividing Factors for European Far-Right and Mainstreaming of Far-Right Before 2024 European Elections*

One of the biggest common denominators among European far-right parties is their anti-immigrant policies, especially towards non-European and Muslim irregular immigrants. On the other hand, the main dividing issue for far-right parties is their foreign and security policy priorities. While some political figures like Salvini and Le Pen had close ties with Putin, some like Meloni have a more Atlanticist approach to foreign policy. Even those, who have been closer to Putin before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, after the invasion, have tried to put a distance and they have shifted their anti-migration attitude towards Ukrainian asylum seekers as well.

Wagner and Meyer found strong evidence for accommodation by mainstream parties and little evidence for moderation of far-right parties. There has been a movement towards the right in European party systems in the last decades. Moreover, the mainstream and the far-right have shifted towards greater

authoritarianism and the far-right has been more than the mainstream (Wagner and Meyer, 2017, p. 86).

The centre-right by including the far-right as a coalition partner or as a support party has put an end to a situation in which far-right votes were wasted. In Western Europe, the collaboration between far-right and centre right started in Austria (Bale, 2010, pp. 69-70). In recent years especially after the recent Italian coalition government under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, participation of far-right in coalition governments has become more normalised.

The mainstreaming of far-right rhetoric and policies can be seen in European elections as well, specifically in the election manifestos of the EPP. Mickenberg argues that "instead of a mainstreaming of the radical right, we observe a radicalization of the mainstream" (Minkenberg, 2013, pp. 53-67). For instance, in EPP's election manifesto for the 2014 European elections, "controlling immigration into Europe to ensure internal security" was part of its proposals. While its 2019 manifesto, which was influenced by the far-right agenda, focused on "Europe that preserves our ways", and particularly mentioned 'illegal immigration' and 'radical Islam' as fundamental threats to Europe (Mudde, 2019, pp. 29-30).

In 2019 Ursula von der Leyen was elected as European Commission President with the help of *Fidesz*, which remained in the EPP for a very long time, although it has gradually adopted far-right party characteristics (*The European Conservative*, 2024).

The far-right groups at the EP are divided. The ECR defines itself as 'Eurorealists'. The ID group had MEPs mostly from National Rally, the League and the AfD. They emphasised "the Greek-Roman and Christian heritage as the pillars of European civilisation" (*ID Group Statute*). They are in favour of "cooperation between sovereign European nations, and therefore reject any further evolution toward a European superstate… They

oppose any new transfer of power from the nations to the EU" (*ID Group Statute*). Their main difference is that the members of the ID mostly have close ties with Putin and they are critical towards NATO. On the other hand, the EPP is the biggest party family at the EP. One of the common characteristics of these three parties was their cultural perception of European identity, focusing on Christianity, Roman heritage, while EPP is different because of being in favour of further European integration and they are not nativist.

The Russia-Ukraine war triggered a crucial transformation of the EU and its member states as well, especially in terms of their security and defence policies. For instance, formerly neutral Finland became a member of NATO and the far-right Finns Party decided to leave ID and move to the ECR. In the party statement, it was stated that 'radical change in Finland's security policy' caused by Russia's war on Ukraine led the party to "re-examine international cooperation networks" (*YLE News,* 2023). Thus, one of the main issues that affect the collaboration between far-right parties before the 2024 European elections was the Russia-Ukraine war and these parties' relations with Putin.

Thus, we have seen the 'normalisation' of far-right, meanwhile the 'radicalisation of centre-right'. We have also seen the rising normalisation of far-right and centre right coalitions as well. These political tendencies at the national level may have implications at the European level too. As the leader of the biggest far-right coalition in Western Europe, Meloni has already started her attempts to increase collaboration with the centre-right parties across Europe. For instance, she met at the beginning of September 2023 with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to collaborate to fight against irregular migration towards Europe. She has been also a pioneer actor in Europe in terms of externalisation of migration management as well by

collaborating with neighbouring countries such as Tunisia and Albania. The far-right and populist right coalition government of Meloni may accelerate mainstreaming of far-right, normalization of far-right and centre-right coalitions and radicalization of centre-right in European politics as well.

4. *Conclusion*

Since the migration crisis, the far-right parties have moved from the margins to the mainstream of European politics. Their party manifestos and their leaders' speeches declare their opposition to immigrants and refugees, particularly those who are culturally different, and perceived as threatening jobs, social benefits, security, culture and the lifestyle of the natives. Their anti-immigrant rhetoric has pushed these issues on the agenda across Europe (Sarkar, 2019, pp. 170-174).

Kundnani (2023) argues that "we tend to idealise the EU as an inherently progressive or even cosmopolitan project, making it seemingly incompatible with far-right thinking." He puts forward that the far right in Europe does not only speak on behalf of the nation against Europe, but also on of a 'different kind of imagined community' and focuses on a 'threatened European civilisation'. The far-right parties have the goal of making a 'far-right EU' which would return power to member states. The far-right parties seem to cooperate to reach their common goals, particularly they try to transform the EU migration policy. Especially after the far-right-populist conservative coalition in Italy, we have seen increasingly "the convergence between the pro-European centre-right and the Eurosceptic far-right" (Kundnani, 2023).

After the Russia-Ukraine war, the Global Europe vision has become more predominant in the EU. However, the elections

in France and Italy (2022), the Netherlands (2023) and Austria (2024) reflected that 'Parochial Europe' is still the biggest competitor to this vision.

The negative socio-economic impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war on Europe, particularly rising inflation rates, energy and housing prices were influential on the result of the 2024 European elections. If these problems cannot be solved or at least decreased by the mainstream parties in power, the far-right parties, especially those which are currently in opposition may benefit more from this conjuncture.

For instance, after the recent changes in the retirement age in France, there had been long demonstrations. If these socio-economic problems cannot be solved, there is a risk of further rise of Le Pen's party NR.

It is still unclear which vision of Europe will be predominant in the EU. The competition between many Europes has been going on. In recent years there has been further emphasis on European cultural identity and protection of European civilisation especially after the migration crisis. On the other hand, the EU has been transforming into a 'Geopolitical Europe', especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

As a result, to what extent the challenges of irregular migration, energy and housing prices will be overcome, the demands of the farmers will be met will influence the level of success of the far-right. In addition to these, the position of far-right parties especially in France and Germany and other members of the EU and the level of cooperation between the far-right and the centre-right will influence which vision of Europe will be predominant in the future.

If the far-right becomes stronger, this may primarily lead to further securitization and externalization in EU migration policy. Moreover, it may challenge the implementation process of the measures towards reaching the goals of the Green Deal as

well. In addition to these, the results of the American elections have also influenced the role of far-right in European politics as well. It has increased the self-confidence of far-right and its further normalization in global politics. Consequently, the results of the European elections reflected how European politics have been transforming after this 'polycrisis' in the last decades and rising influence of far-right in European politics.

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Defining the Far Right in South-East Europe: A Comparative Study of Three Countries.
Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania

VERA TIKA[1]

Abstract. This study explores the Far Right in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria through a comparative framework, analyzing its ideological foundations, mobilization strategies, and electoral trajectories. Utilizing a combination of Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), Comparative Area Studies (CAS), and historical institutionalism, the research examines how historical legacies, political institutions, and socio-economic conditions shape far-right movements and parties in Southeastern Europe. The study distinguishes radical and extreme right actors, highlighting their adaptability to different political landscapes. Key drivers of far-right success, including nationalist revivalism, economic discontent, and distrust in democratic governance – are assessed alongside variations in ideological narratives and electoral strategies. By contextualizing these national cases within broader European trends, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of far-right politics in post-communist and crisis-prone environments.

Keywords: Far-right politics, Populist radical right vs. extreme right, Nationalism and nativism, Authoritarianism and illiberalism, Comparative political analysis, post-communist transition, Historical institutionalism,

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Electoral volatility, Party system fragmentation, Southeastern Europe, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Crisis-driven radicalization, European political systems, Democratic backsliding

Introduction

This study employs a comparative qualitative methodology, integrating historical institutionalism, electoral analysis, and political process tracing to examine far-right mobilization in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. The research design follows a focused comparison, enabling an in-depth exploration of the political, institutional, and socio-economic factors shaping far-right trajectories in these three countries.

The selection of cases follows a comparativist logic, drawing from multiple case selection strategies to ensure a robust analytical framework. The study applies a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), as Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria differ historically, institutionally, and politically – Greece lacks a communist past, while Romania and Bulgaria experienced post-communist transitions. Despite these systemic divergences, all three cases exhibit strong far-right mobilization, allowing for an investigation of common explanatory variables, such as economic instability and austerity-induced discontent, nationalist revivalism and historical memory politics, and institutional weaknesses alongside public distrust in democratic governance. The objective is to identify structural and contextual factors that transcend systemic differences in shaping far-right mobilization.

Simultaneously, Romania and Bulgaria are analyzed using a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), as they share key characteristics, including post-communist transitions and legacies of one-party rule, economic restructuring and EU

integration, and the presence of large ethnic minority groups (Turks, Roma, Hungarians). Despite these similarities, their far-right trajectories have diverged, with Romania's far-right politics being more influenced by interwar fascist legacies (e.g., the Iron Guard), whereas Bulgaria's far-right mobilization has centered around ethno-nationalism and anti-Turkish sentiment. The objective in this case is to explain variation in far-right electoral success and ideological framing within comparable political and historical settings.

Given that all three cases are situated in Southeastern Europe, the study also adopts a Comparative Area Studies (CAS) framework, recognizing the regional specificity of far-right mobilization in post-authoritarian and post-communist contexts. Unlike in Western Europe – where the emergence of contemporary far-right parties during the 1980s and 1990s, often described as a "second wave," has been interpreted as a backlash to post-materialist value shifts and cultural liberalization that began in the 1970s (Inglehart, 1977; Betz, 1994) – far-right mobilization in Southeastern Europe has been more directly shaped by nationalist revivalism, historical revisionism, and disillusionment with the outcomes of post-communist transitions.[2] The objective here is to assess how regional political,

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[2] Scholars commonly distinguish between successive "waves" of far-right mobilization in postwar Europe. The *first wave* (1940s-1970s) consisted of marginal neo-fascist and nationalist parties that remained politically isolated due to the legacy of WWII. The *second wave*, beginning in the *1980s and 1990s*, marked the rise of electorally successful *populist radical right* parties such as the Front National in France and the FPÖ in Austria, often interpreted as a backlash to post-materialist cultural change and the crisis of mainstream party systems (Ignazi, 1992; Betz, 1994). A *third wave* in the 2000s saw the mainstreaming of far-right discourse and increased professionalization, while recent developments in the 2010s have led some to propose a *fourth wave*, characterized by illiberal governance, digital mobilization, and the blurring

economic, and historical factors shape far-right developments beyond national idiosyncrasies.

The study further draws on historical institutionalism to analyze how long-term historical trajectories shape contemporary political developments (Thelen, 1999; Pierson, 2004). The concept of *path dependence* is particularly salient in explaining the distinct forms of far-right mobilization in the region: Romania's far-right revivalism can be traced to interwar fascist traditions and the ideological imprint of national communism during the Ceaușescu era;[3] Bulgaria's nationalist radicalization is rooted in post-Ottoman ethno-political hierarchies and

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of boundaries between far-right and traditional conservative actors (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

[3] In Romania, national communism emerged prominently under Nicolae Ceaușescu after 1965 and peaked during the 1970s-1980s. It represented a unique synthesis of Marxist-Leninist rule and nationalist mythology, strategically adopted to assert ideological independence from the Soviet Union and consolidate internal regime legitimacy. Ceaușescu distanced Romania from Moscow's influence, notably after the 1968 refusal to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia and constructed a distinct path to socialism rooted in Romanian historical identity. National communism served to replace class-based Marxism with a unifying ethno-nationalist vision that mobilized loyalty through myths of historical continuity and external threat. Key features included: the rehabilitation of pre-communist nationalist figures (such as Mihai Eminescu and Avram Iancu); the construction of a state cult around Ceaușescu as a "father of the nation"; and the heavy promotion of Dacian-Roman continuity theories to emphasize ethnic purity and historical sovereignty. The 1971 "July Theses" reintroduced ideological rigidity, national pride, and cultural censorship, reinforcing Ceaușescu's authoritarian control. The regime also reframed the Iron Guard's legacy – not through direct rehabilitation, but via selective memory politics that emphasized anti-Sovietism and Romanian exceptionalism. This ideological framework normalized nationalist tropes that would later resurface in post-1989 far-right discourse, including anti-Hungarian rhetoric in Transylvania, ethnocentric victimhood narratives, and the valorization of authoritarian leadership.

entrenched anti-minority sentiments;[4] while Greece's far-right evolution has been shaped by the legacies of military authoritarianism and recurring economic crises.[5] By highlighting how

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[4] In Bulgaria, far-right radicalization is deeply rooted in the long-term legacy of post-Ottoman nation-building and entrenched patterns of ethnic majoritarianism. Following independence in 1878, the Bulgarian state was constructed on the ideological foundations of Orthodox Christianity, linguistic unity, and ethnic homogeneity. These ethno-political frameworks were reinforced through both monarchical and later communist rule, shaping a political culture that marginalized minority groups – particularly Turks, Roma, and Pomaks. The communist regime under Todor Zhivkov continued these dynamics by implementing aggressive assimilationist campaigns, most notably the "Revival Process" (1984-1989), which involved forced name changes and the suppression of Turkish cultural identity. These policies institutionalized anti-minority sentiment and redefined Bulgarian national identity in exclusionary terms. The persistence of this ethno-nationalist framework in state narratives and education systems created fertile ground for the reemergence of far-right actors in the post-communist period, often framing minorities as threats to national cohesion and sovereignty.

[5] In Greece, the trajectory of far-right politics has been profoundly shaped by a layered legacy of authoritarianism and recurring national crises. While the military junta of 1967–1974 institutionalized a nationalist, anti-communist, and socially conservative framework, this was not an isolated episode. Earlier authoritarian regimes – most notably the Metaxas dictatorship (1936–1941) – established foundational tropes that continue to resonate in contemporary far-right discourse: glorification of the nation-state, cult of the leader, Orthodox traditionalism, and fear of internal enemies. The Metaxas regime, influenced by fascist models, promoted a vision of Greekness rooted in cultural purity and militarized unity, while suppressing political pluralism and leftist ideology. Post-civil war state formation (1949 onward) further entrenched a national identity built on anti-communism and loyalty to a centralized ethno-religious ideal. These ideological continuities were carried into the junta period and, despite democratization in 1974, elements persisted within key institutions such as the police, judiciary, and education system. These authoritarian residues reactivated during the post-2009 debt

institutional persistence and historical legacies condition the trajectories of far-right movements, this methodological lens underscores the importance of temporality in comparative analysis.

Additionally, the study situates Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria within the broader European context by aligning their far-right trajectories with wider transformations in European party systems. These include increasing electoral volatility and the erosion of traditional partisan alignments (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), as well as crisis-driven radicalization and the mainstreaming of far-right rhetoric (Mudde, 2007). By employing a cross-regional comparative design, the analysis links national and regional developments to broader European trends, positioning Southeastern Europe within the wider continuum of far-right party evolution across the continent.

The study relies on a triangulated analytical framework combining electoral performance analysis, institutional responses, and historical-political developments to offer a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of far-right dynamics. It investigates patterns of voter support, shifts in party competition, and evolving political alignments across cases. In parallel, it examines legal and institutional mechanisms used to regulate or suppress far-right actors, including party bans, judicial rulings, and the role of state and EU-level instruments. Special attention is paid to the strategies of mainstream political actors – whether they seek to co-opt, legitimize,

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crisis, as economic collapse and political delegitimation enabled the resurgence of far-right narratives emphasizing moral decline, national humiliation, and border insecurity. In this context, actors like Golden Dawn were able to capitalize on both contemporary grievances and long-standing ideological patterns rooted in Greece's authoritarian past.

or contain far-right forces – and the effects of these strategies on democratic institutions.

Methodologically, the study integrates Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), Comparative Area Studies (CAS), and Historical Institutionalism to capture both structural convergence and national particularities. This multidimensional framework allows for the identification of shared drivers – such as historical legacies, institutional persistence, and socio-economic discontent – while also tracing country-specific variations in far-right mobilization and resilience.

Ultimately, the research contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of how historical continuities, crisis conditions, and party system transformations interact to shape far-right trajectories in Southeastern Europe. It highlights how the region, often perceived as peripheral, is in fact integral to the evolving landscape of European far-right politics and offers critical insight into the complex interplay between legacy, structure, and agency in democratic backsliding.

1. *The Complexity of Defining the Far Right*

The term *far right* has gained significant traction in contemporary political and scholarly discourse, yet its conceptual boundaries remain contested and fluid, appearing regularly in public debates, media narratives, and scholarly literature. Despite its widespread use, the concept remains analytically ambiguous, and efforts to delineate its boundaries continue to challenge both scholars and practitioners. While there is broad agreement that the far right encompasses a heterogeneous spectrum of ideologies, parties, and movements situated at the outermost edge of the right-wing continuum, the category itself is

neither monolithic nor static. Rather, it includes a diverse array of actors whose ideological profiles and organizational forms evolve in response to shifting historical, economic, and social contexts (Minkenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2019).

The definitional challenge is well documented in political theory. As Cohen and Nagel (1934, p. 231) observed, definitions aim to extract the essential features of a concept; yet in the case of the far right, no universally accepted definition has been established. This difficulty arises from both ontological and epistemological complexities, as Grippo (2023) has recently emphasized. Far-right actors may operate within democratic institutions, engage in extra-institutional activism, or adopt an explicitly anti-democratic stance (Pirro & Castelli Gattinara, 2018). Such ideological and organizational fluidity complicates attempts to impose rigid categorical boundaries on far-right movements.

One of the most debated distinctions within the field is that between the *radical right* and the *extreme right.* Traditional typologies often struggle to accommodate the hybrid nature of far-right formations, many of which simultaneously participate in electoral politics while mobilizing against liberal democratic norms. According to Mudde (2007), the far right includes both the populist radical right – actors that formally accept democratic procedures while undermining liberal democratic values – and the extreme right, which categorically rejects democracy and often promotes authoritarian or neo-fascist principles. Nevertheless, even within these subcategories, significant conceptual ambiguities persist, reflecting deeper tensions within far-right scholarship.

This fragmentation is clearly illustrated in Kai Arzheimer's (2022) bibliometric analysis of far-right studies in Western Europe. His review identifies no fewer than 227 instances of the term "Radical Right," 171 of "Extreme Right," 88 of "Far

Right," 72 of "Right-Wing Extremism," 71 of "Right-Wing Populism," 54 of "Populist Radical Right," and 25 of "Radical Right-Wing Populism." This terminological proliferation not only reflects the diversity of far-right phenomena but also underscores the ongoing struggle to establish a coherent conceptual framework for their analysis. As Eatwell (2004) and Hainsworth (2008) point out, these terms are often used interchangeably – even within the same text – leading to further analytical vagueness.

The difficulty of defining the far right is compounded by the absence of agreed-upon ideological criteria. As Mudde (2007) notes, scholars often fall into a circular trap: attempting to identify ideological traits based on parties already assumed to be far right, rather than developing a set of pre-existing criteria to guide classification. Carter (2005) similarly critiques the term "far right" for its spatial vagueness, arguing that such designations should be grounded in substantive ideological analysis. Others, such as Charalambous (2015a) and Art (2011), advocate using the term as an umbrella for all actors situated to the right of mainstream conservatism, while still acknowledging its conceptual imprecision.

Despite the lack of terminological consensus, most scholars agree on a core set of ideological attributes. Mudde (2007, 2019) identifies nativism, authoritarianism, and populism as the foundational pillars of the contemporary far right. Nativism is defined as the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group, with non-native people and ideas viewed as existential threats. Authoritarianism, in this context, denotes a strong preference for order, hierarchy, and punitive enforcement of social norms. Populism, as applied to the far right, frames society as a binary conflict between a virtuous and homogeneous people and a corrupt and detached elite.

Anne Quinchon-Chaudel expands this framework by identifying five core traits that recur – albeit in varying degrees – across far-right movements: (1) rejection of the principle of human equality, often articulated through racial, ethnic, or cultural hierarchies; (2) an essentialist and homogeneous conception of the national "people"; (3) a Manichean worldview that separates society into antagonistic camps of "us" and "them"; (4) advocacy for an authoritarian state led by a strong protector figure; and (5) dual protectionism, combining economic nationalism and cultural conservatism.

Visualisation of the 'far right' set, its constituent subsets, and their defining characteristics
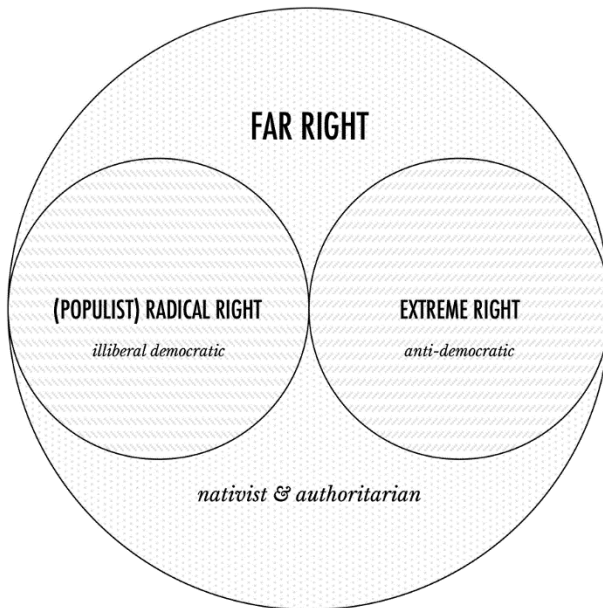
Source: Pirro (2023), p. 106

Pirro (2023) further enhances this analytical landscape by proposing a typological model that maps far-right actors along two axes: democratic versus anti-democratic orientation, and programmatic moderation versus ideological extremity. Within the broader 'far-right' set, he identifies two constituent subsets, the (populist) radical right and the extreme right – whose principal distinction lies in their stance toward democracy. The (populist) radical right, while rejecting the liberal-democratic order, remains formally committed to democratic competition and tends to operate within electoral systems. These actors qualify as "illiberal democratic," opposing pluralism and minority rights but not necessarily seeking to overthrow democratic structures. In contrast, the extreme right is categorically anti-democratic, aiming to dismantle constitutional norms and liberal institutions. Here, the political conflict between 'natives' and 'non-natives' is conceived not just as ideological, but existential, justifying the elevation of struggle beyond the political into outright antagonism. Drawing inspiration from the German Federal Constitutional Court's interpretation of the Basic Law, Pirro argues that this distinction travels well across systems and is vital for identifying those actors who participate in democratic politics to subvert it from within, versus those who reject it altogether.[6]

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[6] While Pirro's typology offers a valuable framework for distinguishing between the populist radical right and the extreme right, it is not without limitations. Its foundation in German constitutional jurisprudence raises questions of transferability beyond liberal-democratic contexts. In post-communist or hybrid regimes, the binary between illiberal-democratic and anti-democratic actors may obscure ideological fluidity and strategic ambiguity. Moreover, it is a descriptive tool that does not account for transformation over time. Finally, the role of populism – present in many but not all radical-right formations – deserves more explicit theorization within the typology.

The conceptual instability surrounding far-right classifications has consequences for comparative research. As Mudde (2007) emphasizes, the inconsistent and overlapping use of different labels undermines cumulative knowledge production. It is not uncommon for individual studies to employ multiple terms interchangeably, even when describing the same political actor. This "conceptual confusion" (Mudde, 2007, p. 23) limits the field's ability to establish generalizable findings.

Moreover, as Zulianello (2018) argues, the distinction between systemic and anti-system actors remains a crucial dimension for understanding far-right behavior. Anti-system parties are defined not merely by opposition to incumbents but by their rejection of the foundational values, norms, and institutional logics of democratic governance. Accordingly, while radical right parties may function within electoral systems, they challenge the liberal-democratic consensus from within; in contrast, the extreme right situates itself outside and often against the democratic polity entirely.

In the context of post-communist countries, definitional ambiguity becomes even more pronounced. As several scholars have noted (Minkenberg, 2002; Vachudova, 2020), far-right politics in Central and Southeastern Europe often emerge from distinct ideological genealogies, such as authoritarian nationalism, anti-communism, and ethno-populist state-building rather than Western Europe's post-materialist backlash. In

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Additionally, the typology is primarily descriptive rather than explanatory or predictive; it outlines where actors are located but does not address how or why they shift between categories over time. This is especially relevant in an era where mainstream parties may adopt far-right narratives, and far-right actors increasingly engage in normalization strategies. Finally, while Pirro distinguishes between populist and non-populist radical-right actors, the role of populism as a mediating or amplifying variable within the far right could benefit from deeper theoretical integration.

these settings, the boundaries between nationalist conservatism, authoritarian populism, and radical right extremism are frequently blurred, due to institutional discontinuities, weak party systems, and contested historical narratives. For example, actors espousing revisionist views of interwar fascism or rehabilitating communist-era ethno-nationalism may resist classification under conventional Western typologies. Moreover, the legacy of transitional justice and the weakness of liberal democratic norms in post-communist democracies often allow far-right actors to adopt ambiguous ideological positions, combining nominal democratic participation with authoritarian, exclusionary, or revisionist agendas. As a result, comparative typologies must remain sensitive to these regional specificities when analyzing the far right in post-authoritarian and post-totalitarian contexts.

Ultimately, the definitional enterprise surrounding the far right must be approached not as a search for rigid boundaries, but as a theoretically grounded and empirically responsive analytical undertaking. This is especially crucial in the study of post-communist and post-authoritarian contexts, where conventional taxonomies often fall short in capturing the ideological hybridity, institutional ambiguity, and historical legacies that shape far-right formations. Rather than impose universalist categories, this analysis adopts a flexible yet conceptually coherent framework that identifies the far right as a dynamic political constellation spanning from illiberal democratic to overtly anti-democratic actors. By foregrounding both typological clarity and contextual nuance, the subsequent examination of Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria aims to elucidate the ways in which far-right movements are shaped by, and in turn reshape, the political and institutional landscapes in which they operate.

2. *The Far Right in Southern Europe: Greece, Portugal, and Spain*

The far right in Southern Europe has followed a distinct trajectory compared to its counterparts in Western and Northern Europe. The legacy of authoritarian regimes in Spain under Franco, Portugal under Salazar, and the Greek military junta (1967-1974) initially impeded the development of far-right parties after the democratic transitions in the 1970s. Unlike in Western Europe, where far-right parties emerged as challengers to post-war liberal democracy, the collapse of right-wing authoritarianism in Southern Europe created an environment in which far-right movements struggled for legitimacy (Mudde, 2007; Mammone et al., 2012).

For many years, these countries lacked strong far-right movements, as mainstream conservative parties absorbed nationalist elements and authoritarian legacies remained discredited (Mammone, 2015; Mudde, 2007). However, economic crises, immigration, and growing Euroscepticism have provided fertile ground for the resurgence of far-right politics in the region (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). In Greece, the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn gained significant electoral support in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, capitalizing on anti-austerity sentiments and nationalist rhetoric before its eventual criminalization (Ellinas, 2013). More recently, Greek Solution and other nationalist movements have sought to rebrand far-right politics in the country (Lazaridis & Campani, 2016).

Similarly, Spain's far-right remained dormant for decades, with Francoist nostalgia confined to fringe movements (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). However, the rise of Vox in the 2010s marked a shift, as the party positioned itself as a defender of national unity against Catalan separatism and illegal

immigration. Portugal, which had long resisted far-right electoral breakthroughs, saw the emergence of Chega, a party that blends nationalism with anti-elitist populism (Marchi, 2021). Unlike their Western European counterparts, which focus heavily on Islamophobia and cultural grievances, far-right parties in Southern Europe often emphasize national sovereignty, historical revisionism, and opposition to left-wing political forces (Mudde, 2019).

These developments demonstrate that while the far right in Southern Europe shares ideological similarities with movements elsewhere, its historical and political context has shaped unique trajectories. The interplay between authoritarian legacies, economic instability, and regional political dynamics continues to influence how these parties evolve and position themselves within their respective political landscapes.

3. *The Far Right in Postcommunist Countries: Distinctive Characteristics*

Much of the academic discourse on the far right has traditionally focused on Western Europe, where radical right-wing movements emerged in response to post-war democratic consolidation, immigration, and European integration. However, far-right movements in post-communist countries constitute a distinct political phenomenon, shaped by the legacies of authoritarian rule, economic transformations, and unresolved ethno-national tensions. Unlike their Western counterparts, these movements did not develop within stable democratic environments but rather in transitional societies, navigating the institutional void left by the collapse of communism. The unique interplay between historical revisionism, nation-

building processes, and economic disenchantment has profoundly influenced the evolution of the postcommunist far right.

Despite these contextual differences, there are notable ideological and strategic parallels between postcommunist and Western far-right movements. In both cases, these parties oppose globalization, supranational governance structures, and liberal democratic norms while promoting exclusionary nationalism (Bustikova, 2019). However, the postcommunist far right has been particularly shaped by historical grievances, positioning itself as the guardian of national identity against both external Western liberalism and domestic post-communist elites. Ralf Melzer and Sebastian Serafin (2013) highlight how these parties frequently engage in historical revisionism, seeking to rehabilitate authoritarian nationalist figures who predated communist rule while simultaneously demonizing leftist legacies.

Economic transformations following the fall of communism provided additional structural opportunities for the far right. The disruptive impact of neoliberal reforms, the privatization of state assets, and the emergence of social inequalities created widespread disillusionment with the transition to democracy. Far-right parties effectively capitalized on socio-economic grievances, presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty, economic protectionism, and social conservatism (Pirro, 2015). This socio-economic appeal differentiates postcommunist far-right movements from many of their Western European counterparts, where economic neoliberalism is often integrated into far-right platforms.

Another defining characteristic of the postcommunist far right is its deep entanglement with ethno-nationalism and state-building processes. Unlike in Western Europe, where far-right movements primarily construct anti-immigration and

anti-Islam narratives, postcommunist far-right actors often focus on territorial disputes, historical irredentism, and minority politics (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). The Hungarian party Jobbik, for instance, has consistently mobilized irredentist rhetoric, advocating for the protection of ethnic Hungarian minorities in neighboring states. Similarly, far-right movements in Slovakia, Romania, and the Balkans instrumentalize ethnic divisions and nationalist grievances to consolidate support.

Additionally, religion plays a more prominent role in shaping far-right narratives in postcommunist states. Unlike the secularized far right in much of Western Europe, far-right movements in Eastern and Southeastern Europe frequently maintain alliances with nationalist religious institutions, particularly Orthodox and Catholic churches. This ideological fusion of Christian nationalism, anti-globalization, and anti-liberalism reinforces a civilizational discourse, wherein Western secularism is framed as a threat to national identity and moral values (Minkenberg, 2017). This divergence further differentiates Eastern European far-right parties from their Western counterparts, which often construct Islamophobic narratives rather than religiously inspired nationalism.

Far-right movements in post-communist countries also differ in their relations with the European Union (EU). While Western European far-right parties are largely Euroskeptic, opposing supranational integration and advocating for national sovereignty, post-communist far-right movements display a more ambivalent relationship with the EU. On one hand, they reject Brussels' liberal norms, multiculturalism, and economic policies; on the other, they instrumentalize EU membership to gain economic and political leverage (Vachudova, 2020). This strategic dual approach is particularly evident in Hungary and Poland, where ruling far-right parties leverage EU funding while simultaneously opposing EU governance on

issues such as judicial independence, migration, and minority rights.

Understanding the post-communist far right requires a comparative approach that situates these movements within broader patterns of democratic backsliding and populist radicalization. While Western European far-right parties have followed a trajectory of normalization and de-demonization, integrating into mainstream politics, the Eastern European far right remains deeply rooted in nationalist revisionism, ethnoreligious grievances, and anti-liberal political struggles. In Southern Europe, far-right movements such as Vox in Spain, Chega in Portugal, and Greek Solution in Greece engage in memory politics, emphasizing their authoritarian legacies in different ways. In contrast, far-right actors in Eastern Europe – Jobbik in Hungary, VMRO in Bulgaria, and AUR in Romania – mobilize nationalist narratives centered on historical revisionism and opposition to external influences.

As these movements continue to evolve, they challenge traditional political taxonomies that distinguish between radical and extreme right formations. The growing hybridization of radical and extreme right actors, their strategic adaptation to democratic constraints, and their increasing influence on mainstream conservative parties underscore the fluidity of contemporary far-right politics. A holistic analytical framework that considers both institutional and grassroots dimensions is necessary to fully grasp the complexity and adaptability of far-right movements in post-communist Europe.

I. Greece

In 2023, three far-right parties gained seats in the Greek Parliament, signaling a renewed presence of far-right ideologies in mainstream politics. However, this was not the first time

since 1974 that far-right groups entered Parliament. In 2012, Golden Dawn achieved significant electoral success, and before that, the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) secured parliamentary representation in the 2000s, even participating in a coalition government in 2011.

The fall of the military dictatorship (1967-1974) and the subsequent prosecution of its leaders initially marginalized far-right movements. During the transition to democracy, political power was reclaimed primarily by center-right forces (New Democracy) and the center-left (PASOK), which sought to reestablish democratic institutions and distance Greece from authoritarian legacies. As a result, far-right ideologies were pushed to the political fringes for several decades.

Nevertheless, while far-right influence in mainstream politics was limited after 1974, nationalist networks, authoritarian nostalgia, and fringe groups persisted in Greek society. These elements later found political expression in parties like LAOS and, more aggressively, in Golden Dawn, which capitalized on economic crises and social anxieties to gain electoral traction. The far-right's resurgence in 2023 reflects both a continuation of this trajectory and a new phase of radicalization, as multiple parties now compete for influence within this ideological space.

Immediately after the fall of the dictatorship, several minor far-right groups broke away from the conservative New Democracy (ND) party, advocating for more radical right-wing ideas and seeking to capitalize on the disillusionment of ultraconservatives and nostalgic supporters of the authoritarian regime. These groups emerged in reaction to the abolition of the monarchy and the perceived moderation of the traditional right under Konstantinos Karamanlis, who led Greece's democratic transition.

The first significant party of this period was Éthniki Parátaxis (National Alignment), which, while not contesting the 1974 elections, quickly positioned itself as a political vehicle for disaffected royalists and junta sympathizers. In the 1977 legislative elections, the party secured 350,000 votes, significantly weakening New Democracy by attracting former junta supporters and hardline monarchists. However, Karamanlis – followed by his successor, Georgios Rallis – pursued a strategy of gradual reintegration, absorbing members of National Alignment without adopting its ideological positions. This approach ultimately led to the party's decline by the early 1980s.

In the wake of National Alignment's dissolution, other radical right-wing formations attempted to gain political ground. Among them was the Progressive Party, which sought to unite ultraconservative factions rejecting New Democracy's dominance. However, it failed to secure a large enough electorate and remained politically marginal.

More significant, however, was the establishment of the National Political Union (EPEN) in 1984, a party founded under the direct influence of former dictator Georgios Papadopoulos. From his prison cell, Papadopoulos actively encouraged the creation of a political force explicitly nostalgic for the junta, advocating for the release of the imprisoned colonels. Although EPEN's parliamentary impact remained minimal, its role in ideologically structuring the Greek far-right was crucial. The party provided a platform for nationalist and authoritarian elements, fostering a radical political culture that would later influence even more extreme formations.

Notably, Golden Dawn, which would emerge as Greece's most notorious far-right organization, drew some of its early members from EPEN's youth wing, including its first secretary-general. Despite their ephemeral or limited electoral success, these early far-right parties established the ideological and

militant groundwork that enabled the reconfiguration and re-surgence of the Greek far-right in the following decades.

In the early 2000s, after nearly three decades without a far-right parliamentary presence, the rise of LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) marked a significant reconfiguration of the Greek political landscape. This shift was facilitated by New Democracy's strategic decision to abandon its longstanding approach of absorbing far-right elements within its ranks. Instead, the party pursued a clearer distinction between the center-right and the far-right, creating an ideological void that Giorgos Karatzaferis – a former New Democracy deputy expelled for his opposition to centrism and his radical rhetoric – swiftly exploited. In response, he founded LAOS, an ethno-populist and nationalist party, which represented what could be considered a third wave of right-wing extremism in Greece.

From its establishment in 2000, LAOS successfully attract ed a conservative electorate by promoting a platform that combined aggressive nationalism, centered on the principle of "national priority," with a hardline stance against immigration, globalization, and the influence of international finance. While presenting itself as a defender of national sovereignty, LAOS also maintained a degree of commitment to freemarket principles, allowing it to appeal to a diverse spectrum of voters. The party thus managed to mobilize both those nostalgic for a strong interventionist state and those drawn to a protectionist discourse that framed economic and political elites as adversaries.

Recognizing the central role of religion in Greek society, LAOS actively sought to strengthen its ties with the Orthodox Church, particularly by cultivating relationships with influential clergy, including Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens. This religious alignment reinforced its legitimacy among voters who prioritized traditional values.

This multi-pronged strategy proved highly effective. In the 2007 legislative elections, LAOS crossed the parliamentary threshold for the first time, securing 3.8% of the vote and ten seats. Its momentum continued in the 2009 elections, where it increased its share to 5.6% and won 15 seats. In the 2009 European elections, LAOS achieved its best historical result, garnering 7.15% of the vote, marking a pivotal moment in the far-right's institutional consolidation within the Greek political system.

However, despite its fluctuating rhetoric, which oscillated between a veneer of respectability and more radical positions, particularly on identity and immigration, LAOS gradually sought to moderate its discourse. This effort involved softening its stance on certain social issues, such as homosexuality and minority rights, while simultaneously attempting to distance itself from its past anti-Semitic rhetoric and historical revisionism.

As a result, LAOS positioned itself as an ideological crossroads, where different strands of the far-right converged – from nationalist populists to more radical elements, as well as figures from the conservative right who retained some degree of mainstream acceptability among voters. By filling the political void left by New Democracy, the party presented itself as both a protest vehicle and a structured alternative, offering disenchanted right-wing voters a platform for opposition without fully detaching from institutional politics.

LAOS's rise and consolidation not only reconfigured the Greek far-right landscape but also laid the groundwork for the emergence of even more radical formations, most notably Golden Dawn, which capitalized on the shifting political dynamics to establish an openly extremist presence in the years that followed.

The origins of Golden Dawn (GD) trace back to 1983, when Nikos Michaloliakos launched a national-socialist, pro-Nazi, xenophobic magazine under the same name. However, it was not until 1993 that GD was formally established as a political party, positioning itself as a defender of European civilization against perceived threats such as Marxism, liberalism, and egalitarianism.

Michaloliakos, who had been imprisoned in the late 1970s for far-right extremist activity, was later appointed by former dictator Georgios Papadopoulos as the leader of the youth wing of EPEN, a party founded by the imprisoned junta leader. However, in 1983, he distanced himself from EPEN and launched Golden Dawn, initially as a fringe neo-Nazi group with an emphasis on militant nationalism.

During its early years, GD remained marginal and politically insignificant, focusing on foreign policy issues. It actively supported Serbian nationalist forces in the Balkans and maintained ties with Greek ultranationalist volunteers who fought alongside Bosnian Serbs during the Yugoslav Wars. It also took strong positions on the Macedonia name dispute, using it as a rallying point for nationalist mobilization.

From the early 2000s, GD increasingly shifted its focus to domestic issues, particularly immigration, security, and ethnic nationalism. While initially lacking electoral influence, the 2009 economic crisis and subsequent social unrest provided fertile ground for its expansion. With Athens experiencing significant waves of immigration and deteriorating living conditions, GD capitalized on local fears by promoting an anti-immigration and pro-security agenda. It embedded itself within specific neighborhoods, organizing "Greeks-only" food distributions and presenting itself as a protector of native residents. This strategic repositioning allowed GD to build local strongholds and expand its influence, ultimately culminating in its

national breakthrough in 2012, when it entered Parliament with 6.97% of the vote.

The 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent austerity measures imposed by the IMF, the European Commission, and the ECB led to wage cuts, rising unemployment, and increasing crime rates, creating a climate of social unrest and deep political disillusionment. Against this backdrop, Golden Dawn (GD) gained visibility in the public debate, capitalizing on widespread distrust of traditional parties, which were perceived as corrupt, ineffective, and incapable of protecting Greek citizens from the crisis and its consequences.

Golden Dawn portrayed itself as a force of order, discipline, and national resistance, exploiting public frustration by scapegoating immigrants, whom it blamed for rising crime rates and job losses. However, its strategy extended beyond rhetoric. Unlike conventional far-right parties, GD fused electoral politics with street-level intimidation, deploying paramilitary-style squads that targeted immigrants, left-wing activists, and political opponents. These violent tactics reinforced its image as a militant nationalist movement, appealing to individuals who sought a more radical alternative to the mainstream political system.

This approach echoed historical precedents seen in Nazi Germany during the rise of the National Socialist movement. Much like the Sturmabteilung (SA) – the Nazi Brownshirts who operated as a street-fighting force to intimidate opponents and enforce party ideology – Golden Dawn cultivated a culture of paramilitary violence, conducting organized attacks on political dissidents, migrants, and activists. Additionally, just as the SA and early SS gained support by embedding themselves within disenfranchised communities, Golden Dawn followed a similar pattern in Greece, targeting working-class districts,

presenting itself as the sole defender of the nation against perceived threats.

Beyond its anti-immigration discourse, GD embedded itself in local communities, particularly in working-class districts of Athens, where the effects of the crisis were most severe. The party organized "Greeks-only" food distributions, patrolled neighborhoods under the pretense of providing security, and presented itself as a provider of basic services in areas where the state was perceived to be absent. This hyper-local strategy allowed GD to build strongholds in specific neighborhoods, particularly in Athens, Piraeus, and Thessaloniki, before expanding its influence to the national stage.

Despite its extremist origins, Golden Dawn skillfully leveraged media attention – whether through controversial statements, provocative actions, or its confrontational stance against political elites – to reinforce its anti-establishment narrative. Even when criticized, the party used media exposure to its advantage, positioning itself as the only force willing to challenge the political status quo.

By blending electoral politics, local activism, and street militancy, Golden Dawn transitioned from a fringe neo-Nazi movement to a parliamentary force. This strategy culminated in its historic 2012 election breakthrough, when it entered Parliament with 6.97% of the vote and secured 18 seats. The party's success not only reconfigured the Greek far-right landscape but also signaled a broader shift in European politics, where radical right-wing forces increasingly adopted hybrid strategies of electoral legitimacy and extra-institutional activism to expand their influence.

The vote for Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece can be understood through a dual protest dynamic, where a visceral rejection of traditional parties, seen as the guarantors of a stagnant and corrupt political system, was combined with a fierce

opposition to austerity policies imposed by the memorandum agreements with the "troika" (IMF, European Commission, and ECB). These agreements, in the eyes of many voters, symbolized a humiliating submission to the demands of international financial institutions, reinforcing nationalist resentment and a desire to reclaim national sovereignty.

This popular anger was not confined to the far-right electorate but spread across the entire Greek political spectrum, leading to a deep divide within the electorate. On one side were those who, despite their criticism of austerity, accepted the necessity of maintaining government stability to carry out the required reforms. On the other were Golden Dawn voters, who rejected both austerity and the very legitimacy of any government formed by established parties. This sentiment reflected a radicalized mistrust of political elites and a desire to break completely from the existing system.

Motives of *Golden Dawn* voters and the entire electorate — Table 4

Motives	Golden Dawn voters	Entire electorate
Desire for a one-party government	8 %	39 %
Desire for a coalition government	14 %	35 %
Desire for a strong opposition	38 %	11 %
Desire to punish mainstream parties	40 %	14 %
Controversies involving the Memorandum	71 %	53 %
Controversies involving the €	47 %	29 %

Source: Exit poll, Metron Analysis.

The sociological profile of Golden Dawn's electorate in 2012 reflects a complex interplay of economic insecurity, political disillusionment, and nationalist sentiment, marking a profound departure from traditional far-right voting patterns in Greece. While the party's ideology was deeply rooted in authoritarian nationalism and xenophobia, its ability to attract a

broad and diverse voter base speaks to its success in capitalizing on systemic crises and reconfiguring political allegiances beyond ideological extremism.

A key characteristic of Golden Dawn's support was its overwhelmingly male electorate, with men accounting for more than three-quarters of its voters. This gender imbalance is consistent with broader far-right voting trends across Europe, where men are significantly more inclined to support nationalist and authoritarian movements. Economic precariousness and perceived threats to social status played a pivotal role in this dynamic, as many male voters, particularly from working-class backgrounds, were drawn to Golden Dawn's hyper-masculine image, its emphasis on law and order, and its promise to restore national sovereignty. In many ways, this mirrored the role of paramilitary organizations in interwar Europe, where mass male political mobilization under far-right movements was fueled by anxieties over economic displacement and national decline. The party's violent street activism, militarized aesthetics, and claims to be a vanguard force reclaiming Greece from both internal and external enemies reinforced its appeal among men who felt abandoned by the political establishment.

The party's strength among younger voters, particularly those aged 35 to 44, further underscores how Golden Dawn positioned itself as a revolutionary alternative to mainstream politics. Unlike older generations, who often retained party loyalties to New Democracy or PASOK despite frustrations, younger voters had come of age during a period of deepening economic instability, witnessing firsthand the collapse of Greece's post-dictatorship political order. For many, Golden Dawn represented a complete rupture with the status quo, a party that not only rejected the economic and political establishment but actively sought to overthrow it. While radical left

movements also sought to mobilize these disaffected voters, Golden Dawn's combination of nationalist populism, antiausterity rhetoric, and direct community engagement allowed it to attract a segment of the population that felt equally alienated from the far-left's globalist discourse.

Education levels among Golden Dawn's electorate further complicate traditional assumptions about far-right voting behavior. Unlike in many Western European countries, where far-right parties tend to attract disproportionately lower-educated voters, Golden Dawn's electorate was largely composed of individuals with intermediate levels of education, particularly those holding high school diplomas or vocational training. This reflects the phenomenon of "status anxiety" – where individuals who are neither among the most economically disadvantaged nor fully integrated into elite professional spheres experience a profound fear of downward mobility. These voters, often self-employed, small business owners, or lower-tier public sector employees, found themselves particularly vulnerable in the aftermath of the economic crisis, caught between economic precarity and a deepening resentment toward globalization, immigration, and political corruption. The party's messaging, which fused economic protectionism, nationalist rhetoric, and a promise to restore order, resonated deeply with this demographic, offering both a sense of political agency and a vision of national rejuvenation.

Beyond socio-economic factors, Golden Dawn's direct engagement with local communities played a crucial role in expanding its influence beyond traditional far-right circles. Unlike previous far-right movements in Greece, which largely remained confined to ideological fringes, Golden Dawn embedded itself within working-class neighborhoods, organizing food distributions exclusively for Greeks, patrolling areas where crime was a major concern, and presenting itself as an

alternative to the failing state. This strategy bore strong historical echoes of the social programs implemented by fascist movements in interwar Europe, where the provision of social services was used as both a recruitment tool and a means of legitimizing the movement among the population. By positioning itself not merely as a protest party but as an organization actively protecting Greek citizens, Golden Dawn gained a foothold among disaffected communities that had lost faith in the ability of the state to provide for them.

However, what truly set Golden Dawn apart from other Greek far-right movements was its fusion of electoral politics with paramilitary violence, a tactic that had historically been employed by fascist and ultra-nationalist movements during moments of systemic crisis. Much like the Sturmabteilung (SA) in Weimar Germany, Golden Dawn's violent street presence was not an incidental aspect of its political strategy but a core component of its appeal. The party's militant wing actively engaged in coordinated attacks on immigrants, leftist activists, and political opponents, reinforcing its image as a movement willing to take direct action where the state had supposedly failed. This element of street-level intimidation, combined with its parliamentary presence, allowed GD to function both as a political party and as a semi-paramilitary organization, blending the realms of legality and extra-institutional power in a way that few other European far-right movements have done in recent decades.

Demographic characteristics of *Golden Dawn* voters   Table 5

Demograhics	% of total Golden Dawn voters	% of entire sample
GENDER		
Men	76	58
Women	24	42
AGE GROUP		
18–24	15	8
25–34	25	16
35–44	24	19
45–54	18	21
55–64	11	16
65+	7	20
EDUCATION		
Lower	15	21
Intermediate	58	46
Higher	27	33
OCCUPATION		
Employer /Independent Contractor	18	14
Farmers	7	6
Public Servants	14	12
White-Collar Workers	22	21
Unemployed	16	11
Students	7	5
Pensioners	9	23
Housewives	4	7

Source: Exit poll, June 2012, Metron Analysis.

Golden Dawn's electoral rise, therefore, was not simply the product of a crisis-driven far-right resurgence but rather a deliberate recalibration of nationalist politics in Greece, one that built upon historical precedents while adapting to contemporary social and economic conditions. The party's ability to expand its base beyond ideological extremists, incorporate anti-austerity grievances into its platform, and construct an alternative infrastructure of social services and paramilitary violence

marked a significant transformation of the Greek far-right. In this sense, Golden Dawn was not just another far-right party but a movement that actively sought to reshape the political order, drawing on both historical fascist strategies and the unique socio-political vulnerabilities of the Greek crisis. Its rise underscored not only the fragility of post-crisis democratic institutions but also the potential for radical political movements to thrive when mainstream parties fail to address the structural anxieties of their citizens.

Amplified by increasing media exposure and capitalizing on public disillusionment, Golden Dawn rapidly expanded its support base by drawing voters from mainstream center-right formations and the collapsing LAOS party. What had once been a fringe movement – garnering only 0.29% of the vote in 2009 – transformed into a formidable political force, achieving 6.92% in the 2012 parliamentary elections and securing 18 seats in the Hellenic Parliament. This marked a watershed moment in post-dictatorial Greek politics, signaling the institutional entry of an avowedly neo-Nazi organization.

By 2015, Golden Dawn had risen to become the third-largest political party in the country. Yet its parliamentary presence did not temper its militant character. The party remained closely linked to street-level violence, particularly directed against migrants, left-wing activists, and other perceived enemies. These acts were often carried out with alarming impunity, as state authorities and law enforcement agencies were frequently accused of passive complicity or outright inaction.

Golden Dawn's populist rhetoric revolved around the idea that legitimate politics must originate from the grassroots, portraying itself as the guardian of the Greek nation and the champion of a national mission against external and internal enemies. The party framed refugees and migrants as existential threats to Greek identity, security, and sovereignty, embedding

xenophobia within a broader narrative of national resistance. However, unlike far-right parties in Western Europe that have strategically moderated their rhetoric to expand their electoral appeal, Golden Dawn fully embraced political violence and openly fascist imagery, making confrontation – both rhetorical and physical – a defining feature of its identity.

This aggressive posture ultimately led to its downfall. In 2020, Golden Dawn was officially designated a criminal organization and held legally accountable for orchestrating and executing violent attacks on migrants, refugees, trade unionists, and political opponents. The party's paramilitary structure, which had previously contributed to its image as a militant force fighting for the Greek nation, became the legal basis for its criminal prosecution. The murder of Pavlos Fyssas, an anti-fascist rapper, in 2013 was the turning point, sparking mass protests and intensifying political and judicial scrutiny. The Greek judiciary ultimately outlawed Golden Dawn from political activity, and several of its key leaders, including Nikos Michaloliakos, were sentenced to prison, marking one of the most significant legal defeats for a far-right party in contemporary Europe.

Golden Dawn's reliance on extremist rhetoric, direct violence, and organized attacks distinguished it from its far-right counterparts in Western Europe, such as the French National Rally, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and the German Alternative for Germany. Unlike these parties, which have sought to distance themselves from explicit extremism to gain broader electoral legitimacy, Golden Dawn never attempted to soften its ideological stance. Instead, it remained deeply embedded in neo-Nazi aesthetics, paramilitary organization, and street-level violence, embracing a tactical fusion of electoral and extra-institutional power reminiscent of interwar fascist movements.

While its radicalism and militancy initially contributed to its rapid electoral rise, allowing it to attract disillusioned, nationalistic, and anti-austerity voters, this same extremism ultimately sealed its political downfall. Golden Dawn's refusal to adapt to the evolving strategies of the European far-right, combined with its overtly violent nature, made it impossible for the party to survive once judicial and political pressure intensified. The party's collapse not only reshaped the Greek far-right landscape but also served as a warning for other extreme-right movements across Europe, demonstrating that while militancy and radical rhetoric can be mobilizing forces in times of crisis, they also carry the risk of outright criminalization and political marginalization when pushed beyond certain limits.

The decline of Golden Dawn initially appeared to mark a turning point for the Greek far-right, yet rather than signaling its demise, it revitalized the far-right milieu, leading to new party formations that swiftly filled the vacuum left by GD's collapse. The 2023 elections reflected this transformation, as three explicitly far-right parties – The Spartans (a successor to Golden Dawn), Greek Solution, and Niki – secured seats in the Greek Parliament, collectively garnering over 12% of the vote and 34 seats out of 300. This marked the first time since the fall of the military dictatorship that multiple distinct far-right parties simultaneously entered Parliament, demonstrating not a consolidation but a fragmentation of the far-right political space in Greece.

Six months after their historic entry into Parliament, The Spartans and Niki have faced a decline in polling, reflecting both internal organizational struggles and shifts in voter alignment. Meanwhile, New Democracy (ND), the dominant center-right party, has responded to far-right electoral pressure by adopting more nationalist and conservative rhetoric, particularly on migration and family values, in an attempt to retain

right-wing voters while maintaining its mainstream appeal. However, despite its strategic positioning on divisive social issues, ND has struggled to fully contain voter defection, as evidenced by the results of the local elections in the fall and recent polls conducted in January.

The three far-right parties have so far shown relatively weak opposition to ND's government, despite political initiatives on contentious issues such as migration and national identity. However, the political landscape has begun to shift, particularly following recent debates on same-sex marriage and the mobilization of rural voters over economic grievances. In this evolving climate, Hellenic Solution has emerged as the primary beneficiary, recording significant gains in voter intentions for the European elections. Unlike its far-right counterparts, The Spartans and Niki have struggled to maintain momentum, a decline that must be understood in relation to internal party processes rather than solely external political dynamics.

While these three parties compete for influence within the far-right political spectrum, their ideological and strategic differences reflect the fragmentation of nationalist politics in Greece, with each appealing to distinct voter segments – The Spartans to former Golden Dawn supporters, Hellenic Solution to national-populist conservatives, and Niki to religious traditionalists. Their role in reshaping the Greek political landscape remains uncertain, as they navigate internal divisions and shifting voter preferences ahead of the European elections.

The Spartans, Hellenic Solution, and Niki all have roots in national-populist ideologies, positioning themselves as alternatives to what they perceive as corrupt elites and a flawed party system. While each party has distinct ideological priorities, they all advocate for national priorities, stringent migration policies, and a rejection of perceived foreign influence on Greek sovereignty. They also share a narrative built on nostalgia for

an idealized past, national traditions, and historical and religious identity.

In varying degrees, the three parties have expressed skepticism toward COVID-19 policies, particularly regarding state-enforced vaccination and Western medical narratives. While Niki has been the most openly anti-vaccine, Hellenic Solution originally opposed strict pandemic measures but later softened its stance. The Spartans, though not explicitly focused on vaccine opposition, align with broader anti-systemic distrust toward government control and global institutions.

On foreign policy, all three parties share elements of Euroskepticism and nationalism, opposing the Prespa Agreement and advocating for a stronger national stance in international affairs. Niki and The Spartans are more explicitly pro-Russia, frequently criticizing NATO and the European Union as threats to Greek sovereignty. Hellenic Solution, however, maintains a more ambiguous stance, at times critiquing Russia while simultaneously opposing Western policies perceived as undermining Greek interests.

The Spartans (Spartiates) party, founded by Vassilis Stigas in 2017, is a far-right political movement that draws symbolic inspiration from the militaristic and disciplined ethos of ancient Sparta, though in practice, its ideology is more aligned with nationalist populism and ultra-conservatism. The party advocates for stringent measures against illegal immigration, a robust national defense, and a return to traditional Greek values in opposition to modern lifestyles. While The Spartans embrace Greek Orthodox Christianity as a cultural corner-stone, they do not prioritize religious conservatism in policy-making to the extent that Niki does, which positions itself as an overtly religious-political movement.

Economically, The Spartans promote nationalist economic self-sufficiency, though their platform remains vague on

specific economic policies, focusing primarily on sovereignty and national defense rather than free-market principles. Unlike mainstream right-wing economic parties, their stance does not explicitly align with entrepreneurial or neoliberal market policies but rather reflects a broader anti-globalist framework. A significant factor in The Spartans' rise was the endorsement of Ilias Kasidiaris, the former Golden Dawn MP and spokesperson, who supported the party from prison after his own political movement was banned from elections. This endorsement positioned The Spartans as the unofficial successor to Golden Dawn, attracting former GD voters while maintaining formal political distance from neo-Nazi imagery. The party frequently criticizes the European Union, international financial institutions, and progressive social policies, framing them as threats to Greek national identity and sovereignty.

Hellenic Solution emerged in 2016 as a nationalist-populist alternative to both the traditional right and the extremist farright, later benefiting from Golden Dawn's electoral collapse in 2019. While distancing itself from Golden Dawn's overtly neo-Nazi ideology and violent methods, the party has questioned the judicial process that led to the criminalization of Golden Dawn, framing it as a politically motivated attack on nationalist forces. However, it has deliberately avoided direct association with GD, positioning itself as a more respectable nationalist option for disillusioned right-wing voters.

The party gained parliamentary representation in July 2019, securing ten seats, after first winning a single seat in the European Parliament elections earlier that year. Hellenic Solution is known for its affinity for conspiracy theories, which its leader, Kyriakos Velopoulos, propagates through his frequent television appearances on smaller, right-wing media outlets. The party primarily targets voters who feel alienated from the

political system, presenting an image of Greece under siege by corrupt elites, external influences, and migration pressures.

Hellenic Solution places a strong emphasis on Greek Orthodox identity, using it as a cultural and nationalist marker rather than a strict religious doctrine. It frequently promotes traditional values, particularly in relation to family structures, national heritage, and education, as part of its broader antiprogressive, anti-globalist narrative. The party has also advocated for stronger ties with Russia, opposing what it sees as Western dominance over Greek foreign policy, and has strongly criticized EU sanctions on Russia, arguing that they harm Greek economic interests more than they weaken Russia itself.

Positioning itself as a populist force against the political establishment, Hellenic Solution often frames parliamentary democracy as serving entrenched interests, contrasting it with its own vision of a more responsive and patriotic leadership. This rhetorical stance allows it to appeal to voters disillusioned with traditional governance without explicitly calling for democratic restructuring.

Economically, the party supports a protectionist-nationalist economic model, favoring state intervention to support Greek businesses and industries while opposing foreign economic influence. It promotes selective economic nationalism, advocating for policies that prioritize Greek citizens in social benefits and business opportunities, a stance that reveals its ethnocentric approach to economic policy.

Hellenic Solution continues to consolidate its role as the dominant nationalist-populist force in Greece, particularly as far-right rivals like The Spartans and Niki struggle with internal challenges. Its ability to blend nationalist rhetoric, economic protectionism, and media-driven populism has allowed it to remain a stable player in Greece's evolving right-wing landscape.

Founded in 2017, Niki is an ultra-conservative, Orthodox nationalist party that envisions a Greece where Orthodox Christianity serves as the cornerstone of national identity and public life, shaping laws, education, and cultural policies. While not advocating for a formal theocracy, Niki promotes a deep integration of religious principles into governance, positioning itself as a defender of faith, family, and national heritage against the perceived moral decay of modern society.

The party enjoys strong backing from segments of the Orthodox clergy, particularly from ultra-conservative religious circles and networks associated with Mount Athos, as well as lay religious movements that reject secularism. This network has allowed Niki to mobilize devout Orthodox voters, particularly among traditionalist families, rural communities, and religious intellectuals.

Socially, Niki staunchly opposes liberal values and modern lifestyles, engaging in cultural battles over abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, gender roles, and religious education. It calls for a return to Greece's "moral and spiritual roots", advocating for a stricter religious presence in schools, the protection of traditional family structures, and the rollback of progressive social policies. The party vehemently opposes gender ideology, sex education reforms, and the Westernization of Greek cultural norms, framing these issues as attacks on the nation's spiritual and moral foundation.

Politically, Niki rejects the traditional left-right framework, arguing that modern partisan politics are corrupt and morally bankrupt. Instead, it seeks to establish a governance model based on Orthodox Christian morality, positioning itself as a force that transcends ideological divisions in favor of faith-based leadership. While it does not advocate for the abolition of democracy, it views mainstream parties as agents of foreign

interests, disconnected from the spiritual and cultural essence of the Greek people.

On foreign policy, Niki is deeply nationalist and Euroskeptic, advocating for Greek political and cultural autonomy over deeper integration with Western institutions. The party opposes globalization, NATO's influence, and perceived Western encroachments on Greek sovereignty, framing the European Union as a secularist force undermining national identity. It has also expressed sympathies toward Russia, viewing it as a traditional ally and a counterbalance to Western liberalism.

Niki's rise reflects the growing influence of religious nationalism in Greek politics, attracting voters who feel alienated by secularization, progressivism, and globalization. By combining religious revivalism, nationalist rhetoric, and cultural conservatism, the party has carved out a unique position in the Greek far-right landscape, distinct from both the ultra-nationalism of The Spartans and the populist pragmatism of Hellenic Solution. As it continues to build its base, Niki represents a reactionary force against modernity, positioning itself as the last line of defense for Greece's spiritual and historical legacy.

II. Bulgaria

Historically, Bulgaria's political identity has been profoundly shaped by its post-communist legacy, where affiliations with the right were often perceived as more prestigious and less contentious than those with the left. During the tumultuous transition years, the Bulgarian right initially coalesced around anti-communism, liberal economic policies, and pro-European reforms, serving as a unifying force. However, over time, the Bulgarian right fragmented, with different factions emphasizing liberal democracy, national conservatism, or populist governance.

This fragmentation produced three main strands of right-wing politics in Bulgaria. The first category can be labeled as the "authentic" or "liberal" right, represented by traditional UDF members and later by groups like Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) and the Bulgarian People's Union. These factions were characterized by shifting alliances and ideological divisions, reflecting the difficulties of maintaining a unified vision. The populist right also emerged, initially wielding limited electoral influence but later gaining momentum with the National Movement Simeon II and Borisov's GERB party, which transitioned from a centrist orientation to the center-right.

The far right, while present in nationalist movements and minor parties of the 1990s, gained major electoral success in 2005 with the rise of Ataka, a coalition of four nationalist organizations united by their rejection of Western influence, minorities, and liberal democracy. Unlike the radical right movements that surged in Western Europe during the 1980s, Bulgaria experienced a delayed far-right emergence due to its integration into EU accession negotiations, political repression of extremist groups, and the historic dominance of the BSP in nationalist discourse. However, nationalism in Bulgaria was not monopolized solely by the left – it was also present in monarchist, conservative, and populist movements.

Bulgaria's ability to avoid violent ethnic conflict – despite its significant Turkish and Roma minorities – was not merely due to a "unique ethnic model of tolerance," but also to state policies that controlled ethnic tensions. The "Revival Process" in the 1980s, during which tens of thousands of ethnic Turks were forced to adopt Bulgarian names or flee the country, remains a dark chapter of state repression. Later, Bulgaria's EU integration efforts encouraged minority protections, helping to prevent large-scale ethnic unrest.

In this context, Ataka, founded in 2005 by Volen Siderov, became one of Bulgaria's most influential far-right parties. Its ideology was built on radical nationalism, sovereignty, and exclusionary populism, combining left-wing economic protectionism with right-wing ultranationalism. The party's rhetoric was fiercely anti-minority, targeting Roma and Turks as existential threats to Bulgarian identity and sovereignty. Additionally, Ataka has promoted anti-Western conspiracy theories, portraying the EU and NATO as tools of foreign domination over Bulgaria. While antisemitic narratives have occasionally appeared in Ataka's discourse, its primary ideological focus remained anti-Turkish, anti-Roma, and anti-globalist nationalism. Ataka's electoral success in the mid-2000s and early 2010s paved the way for further radicalization in Bulgarian politics, influencing later nationalist movements and contributing to the mainstreaming of xenophobic rhetoric. However, with shifts in political alliances and the rise of new far-right actors, Ataka's influence has waned in recent years, reflecting the evolving nature of the Bulgarian far-right landscape. Ataka's rejection of the political elite was accompanied by a fierce critique of international institutions, which it accuses of stripping Bulgaria of its sovereignty. Opposed to NATO, the European Union's reforms, and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) economic policies, Ataka advocates for an interventionist state, promoting economic protectionism and strong state involvement in national industries.

The party's platform also calls for a return to conservative Orthodox values, seeking to strengthen the role of the Church and restore a powerful state as the guarantor of social order. By capitalizing on anti-elite sentiment, economic frustrations, and ethnic tensions, Ataka has constructed a vision of Bulgaria as a betrayed nation, one that must reclaim its independence and integrity from foreign influence and internal adversaries,

particularly ethnic minorities. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, Ataka shocked the political establishment, securing 8.14% of the vote and 21 seats in Parliament, making it the fourth-largest political force in the country. Ataka's emergence can be explained by two key factors. Firstly, it reflects a deep crisis of confidence in Bulgaria's post-communist political system. Despite undeniable institutional progress, Bulgaria's successive governments – whether composed of former communist elites or pro-Western liberals – failed to meet public expectations for social justice and tangible economic improvements. Since the early 1990s, a succession of governments from across the political spectrum has done little to change the widespread perception of power being monopolized by self-serving elites. This has fostered a growing distrust of institutions, eroding faith in electoral politics, which are increasingly seen not as genuine political shifts, but as superficial rotations within an entrenched oligarchy. Ataka skillfully exploited this widespread disillusionment, presenting itself as a radical force of rupture, one that rejects compromise and fiercely denounces the corruption of the ruling class.

Secondly, Bulgaria's integration into NATO (2004) and the European Union (2007), while widely supported in principle, generated significant frustrations, particularly due to the economic and political sacrifices it entailed. Structural reforms demanded by the IMF and the World Bank, particularly in privatization and market liberalization, exacerbated social inequalities and weakened certain sectors of the population. These developments fueled growing resentment toward international institutions, which Ataka skillfully leveraged. While the party did not outright oppose Bulgaria's EU membership, it strongly criticized the way it was implemented, accusing the country's elites of selling off national sovereignty to foreign interests.

The issue of ethnic minorities, particularly Turks and Roma, has been central to Ataka's discourse. The party has built much of its political identity on the narrative of ethnic Bulgarians as victims, arguing that state policies unfairly favor minorities at their expense. It has repeatedly attacked the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MDL), the political party representing Bulgaria's Turkish minority, claiming that its participation in successive governments has marginalized ethnic Bulgarians – particularly in the allocation of public resources and administrative positions. At the same time, growing social tensions linked to the economic marginalization of Roma communities, often concentrated in urban ghettos and associated in public discourse with crime, provided fertile ground for Ataka's propaganda, which scapegoated these minorities as responsible for Bulgaria's social problems.

Another crucial factor in Ataka's rise was its mastery of media influence, which allowed it to spread its nationalist, anti-elite, and xenophobic messaging directly to the public. The party's leader, Volen Siderov, a former journalist, used nationalist media outlets – most notably Skat TV and later Alfa TV – to cultivate a siege mentality among his audience. Through sensationalist programming, these platforms portrayed Roma, Turkish minorities, and Western institutions as existential threats to Bulgaria, reinforcing a narrative that the country was being exploited by foreign powers and betrayed by its own corrupt elites. This media-driven strategy enabled Ataka to bypass traditional party structures and appeal directly to disillusioned voters, much like Silvio Berlusconi's use of Italian television networks or Donald Trump's reliance on social media in the U.S.

Thus, Ataka's success cannot be reduced simply to a resurgence of extreme nationalism. It must be understood as a

manifestation of deep public distrust in democratic institutions, disillusionment with the promises of European integration, and heightened ethnic tensions in a country still grappling with the contradictions of its post-communist transition, favored by an easily manipulable media environment. By exploiting these fractures and advantages, Volen Siderov and his party positioned themselves as a radical alternative to a stagnant political system, paving the way for a broader reconfiguration of Bulgaria's political landscape along populist and nationalist lines. Ataka's electorate in Bulgaria consisted of individuals from diverse social backgrounds, yet they were united by a shared sense of abandonment in the face of the country's economic and political transformations. While one might have expected support for this radical nationalist party to come primarily from the most economically precarious rural populations, its strongest base of support was actually in urban centers, particularly Sofia and major regional cities. In these areas, daily interactions with minority groups – especially Roma – were more pronounced, and resentment toward political elites was amplified by the perception of endemic corruption and clientelist favoritism. Moreover, Ataka's voter base was not confined to the economically disadvantaged working class. A significant proportion of its supporters held university degrees or at least a secondary education, indicating that discontent with the system extended beyond economic inequality and reflected a deeper crisis of confidence in institutions. This protest vote particularly appealed to voters aged 40 to 50, a generation that had once believed it would benefit from the post-communist transition but had instead become disillusioned with a political system perceived as unresponsive and entrenched in self-interest.

Ataka's voter profile shared several characteristics with farright movements across Europe but also displayed notable

differences. Like France's National Rally (Rassemblement Na-
tional, RN), the party attracted both working-class and middle-
class voters who felt abandoned by mainstream parties. Similar
to Germany's AfD, Ataka combined economic nationalism with
Euroskepticism, positioning itself against Western-imposed
economic liberalization and foreign financial influence. Its
rhetoric also resembled Italy's Lega, particularly in its scape-
goating of minorities, portraying Roma communities as a bur-
den on national resources. However, unlike Western European
far-right parties, which increasingly sought electoral legitimacy
by moderating their rhetoric, Ataka remained openly radical,
refusing to soften its anti-minority and anti-Western stance. Un-
like parties such as French's RN, which shifted away from overt
extremism, or Hungary's Fidesz, which captured state institu-
tions, Ataka never managed to fully consolidate its influence
within the Bulgarian political system, remaining an outsider
force rather than a ruling nationalist party.

Despite its initial success, Ataka's influence began to decline
over time due to internal conflicts, leadership struggles, and
the rise of newer nationalist movements. The emergence of
Vazrazhdane (Revival), a party that embraced a similar Eu-
roskeptic, anti-liberal, and anti-globalist discourse, gradually
absorbed much of Ataka's voter base. Furthermore, main-
stream parties such as GERB and even the Bulgarian Socialist
Party (BSP) began co-opting elements of Ataka's nationalist
rhetoric, reducing its distinct appeal. As nationalist narratives
became more mainstream, Ataka lost its position as the primary
vehicle for Bulgaria's far-right discontent.

Thus, by the late 2010s, newer nationalist forces like Vaz-
razhdane had overtaken Ataka as the dominant far-right force,
proving that Bulgaria's nationalist movement was not a static
phenomenon but a constantly shifting political force shaped
by broader social, economic, and geopolitical factors. Since the

advent of Ataka in 2005, the radical right has progressively exerted influence on the Bulgarian government, with Ataka consistently ranking as the fourth-strongest party in the parliamentary elections of 2005, 2009, and 2013. However, despite these successive electoral successes, Ataka has since declined and failed to secure a single seat in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Indeed, it never managed to establish itself permanently in the national and European political landscape, largely due to its ideological and strategic isolation, its inability to forge strong alliances, and its radical stance, which ultimately distanced it both from other parties and its own electorate. Indeed, while its violently xenophobic rhetoric, open rejection of minorities and globalization, and glorification of Orthodox values allowed it to attract a significant segment of the nationalist electorate, this extreme discourse, combined with a lack of strategy for integration into an influential European parliamentary group, contributed to its isolation and, consequently, to its inability to influence political decisions, whether within European institutions or on the national stage. This isolation, which manifested in Ataka's inability to align itself durably with any European political group other than the short-lived *Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty*, combined with its opportunistic support for a centrist minority government in Bulgaria, led to a massive loss of credibility among an electorate initially drawn to its uncompromising and protest-oriented stance.

However, while Ataka's electoral decline seemed to mark a retreat of the radical right in Bulgaria, it is evident that its nationalist and radical discourse has gradually permeated the corridors of power, to the point of influencing the policies implemented by successive governing coalitions and paving the way for the rise of political formations more adept at constructing a respectable image while pursuing a comparable agenda. Thus, although Ataka never officially joined a government

coalition as a full-fledged partner, its role as parliamentary sup-
port was crucial for several governments, allowing it to exert
influence far beyond its electoral weight and to shape certain
major strategic decisions.

As early as 2009, its support for the minority government led
by GERB (*Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria*) granted
Volen Siderov and his close associates a privileged position, of-
fering them access to strategic parliamentary committee roles
and, more broadly, a significant capacity to pressure the gov-
ernment's political direction. Similarly, when the coalition led
by socialist Plamen Oresharski took power in 2013, Ataka once
again played a pivotal role, particularly in votes concerning en-
ergy policy and diplomatic relations with Russia, reaffirming
the party's status as a key intermediary in promoting Russian
interests in Bulgaria – a recurring theme that, beyond ideolog-
ical alignment, underscores the structural ties many European
far-right parties maintain with the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, the most striking development in recent years
is not merely Ataka's indirect influence but rather the way its
discourse, initially perceived as radical and isolated, has gradu-
ally been normalized to the point of being adopted and refor-
mulated by politically more respectable formations, such as the
Patriotic Front (PF). Established in 2014 through an alliance be-
tween the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bul-
garian National Movement* (IMRO-BNM) and the *National Front
for the Salvation of Bulgaria* (NFSB), this coalition quickly
emerged as a key player in Bulgarian politics. Unlike Ataka, it
successfully integrated into a governing coalition, securing sev-
eral deputy minister positions and thus wielding a much more
concrete influence over the country's policies. The rapid inte-
gration of the *Patriotic Front* into the executive power can
largely be attributed to its ability to tone down its rhetoric,
avoiding Ataka's most outrageous excesses while maintaining a

firm nationalist stance, particularly on identity and migration issues. While Ataka cultivated a rhetoric of open xenophobia and conspiracy theories, the PF adopted a pragmatic political approach, which enabled it not only to ally with GERB but also to steer certain government decisions in its favor. The most emblematic example of this growing influence is undoubtedly the electoral law reform spearheaded by the PF, aimed at drastically restricting ethnic minorities' participation in elections – a measure that, although softened in public discourse, clearly aligns with a strategy of exclusion and marginalization of certain segments of the population. Thus, while Ataka's electoral collapse might be interpreted as a sign of a decline in radical nationalism in Bulgaria, a deeper analysis reveals that its ideas, far from disappearing, have been gradually repackaged and reintegrated into the mainstream political landscape – under a more acceptable yet equally problematic guise.

Moreover, in recent years, new openly far-right and ultranationalist parties have gained increasing electoral influence. This is the case, for example, of Revival, which entered the Bulgarian National Assembly during the 2021 elections, securing 13 seats out of 240. Founded in 2014, the party capitalized on Bulgarian citizens' discontent towards the established elites by campaigning against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccines. In the subsequent elections in November 2022, it experienced further success, securing 27 MPs in Parliament. With the pandemic subsiding, the party has shifted its focus to propagating an anti-EU, anti-NATO, and pro-Russia discourse. It advocates for a referendum on Bulgaria's EU membership and NATO affiliation, accuses the US of exerting influence in Sofia, and calls for closer ties with Russia, citing economic benefits. However, the party is currently grappling with internal turmoil, including recent expulsions of three out of the 36 party members in parliament, and a decline in public support. According to

the Market Links polling agency, support has dropped to 9.9% in February 2024, compared to 14.3% in the last parliamentary elections in 2023, indicating signs of crisis ahead of the EU elections.

	2 April 2023	2 October 2022	14 November 2021	11 July 2021	4 April 2021
Turnout %	40.69	39.41	40.50	42.19	50.61
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria / GERB-SDS	26.49	25.33	22.74	23.51	26.18
Coalition: We Continue the Change + Democratic Bulgaria / PP-DB	24.56				
We Continue the Change / PP		20.20	25.67	24.08	
Coalition: Democratic Bulgaria / DB		7.45	6.37	12.64	9.45
Vazrazdane / Revival	14.16	10.18	4.86	3.01	2.45
Movement for Rights and Freedoms / DPS	13.75	13.75	13.00	10.71	10.51
Bulgarian Socialist Party / BSP	8.93	9.30	10.21	13.39	15.01
Bulgarian Rise / BV	3.06	4.63			
There is Such a People / ITN	4.11	3.83	9.52	24.08	17.66
Rise Up! Oust the Thugs!				5.01	4.72
Not supporting anyone (votes)	109,095	87,635	33,745	35,201	47,749

Election	Leader	Votes	%	Seats	+/−	Status
2017	Kostadin Kostadinov	37,896	1.11	0/240	New	Extra-parliamentary
Apr 2021		78,395	2.41	0/240	Steady 0	Extra-parliamentary
Jul 2021		82,147	2.97	0/240	Steady 0	Extra-parliamentary
Nov 2021		127,568	4.86	13/240	Increase 13	Opposition
2022		254,952	9.83	27/240	Increase 14	Snap election
2023		358,174	13.58	37/240	Increase 10	Opposition

The Bulgarian right-wing is characterized by several distinct features that set it apart from its counterparts in Western Europe. Firstly, there's a notable trend of demonizing internal enemies, exemplified by parties like ATAKA and the Patriotic

Front that primarily target national minorities such as Turks and Roma. Even amidst the migration crisis, the focus remained on internal minorities rather than external "threats". Secondly, socialist nostalgia is still present within the Bulgarian right. Eastern European right-wing populists like those in Bulgaria gained success by responding to the complexities of democratic transitions and disillusionment with democracy rather than traditional cleavages, globalization, or multiculturalism like it's the case for their Western European counterparts. By amalgaming left and right-wing ideologies with a mixture of nationalism, clericalism, and irredentism, intertwined with elements of neo-totalitarianism and welfare chauvinism, Bulgarian's far right often draws support from both the left and right ends of the political spectrum.

As already mentioned, the rise of far-right parties in Bulgaria is mainly attributed to the escalating distrust among Bulgarian citizens towards conventional institutions and political parties, stemming from widespread corruption, inequalities, and the failure of successive governments to address the tangible issues facing the population. Consequently, a growing number of voters are seeking alternative parties that offer pragmatic solutions to the immediate and pressing needs of the people, distance themselves from traditional political methods and prioritize a comprehensive fight against corruption. Far-right parties in Bulgaria have therefore tapped into this disillusionment by presenting themselves as alternatives to the entrenched political elite, offering a narrative of change and renewal, promising to address the concerns of ordinary citizens and restore faith in the political process. By strategically mobilizing dissatisfied voters through anti-establishment rhetoric, populist and far-right parties effectively harness the so called "protest vote". Additionally, economic factors, including high unemployment and perceived mismanagement by traditional parties, have

rendered populist and far-right narratives particularly attractive to the electorate. The loss of social status, especially among the middle class, further reinforces perceptions of economic crisis and mismanagement, fostering reluctance to support traditional parties. Populist parties messaging often revolves around common themes such as nationalism, anti-establishment rhetoric, and emphasis on the need for economic stability, resonating with voters who feel marginalized or disenfranchised by mainstream parties, regardless of their specific grievances or ideological leanings. At the same time, far-right parties like Ataka have carved out a niche by exploiting ethnonationalist sentiments and tapping into concerns about immigration and minority rights.

III. Romania

Far right and ultra-nationalism, embodied by the League of the Archangel Michael party, initially emerged in Romania during the interwar period. Founded by Zela-Codreanu, this party benefited from the rise of xenophobia in the 1920s, partly due to the adoption of the 1923 Constitution, which granted minorities of Magyar, German, Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian, Turkish, Roma, and Greek descent – representing 28% of the total population – the same rights as the majority. Concurrently, the 1929 economic crisis and corruption seriously undermined public confidence in parliamentary democracy, thus paving the way for extremist ideas. Initially marginal, this political formation created in 1927 achieved remarkable success, garnering 16% of the votes in the December 1937 elections, six times more than its score in the 1932 elections, making it the only European fascist movement to enter Parliament without external assistance. Its ideals, centered around traditionalism, nationalism, and xenophobia, closely reflected the principles of

fascism and Nazism. However, what distinguished this party from its German and Italian counterparts was the emphasis on Orthodox Christianity, presented as a fundamental value justifying its extremism and anti-Semitism. By exploiting religious sentiment in rural communities, where illiteracy was widespread and religion held significant importance, the League of the Archangel Michael succeeded in gaining voter support, spreading fascist and xenophobic discourse within Parliament. Its leader Codreanu was eventually executed under Carol II's reign after the establishment of a royal dictatorship.

After the 1989 revolution and the fall of the communist regime in Romania, the far right gradually re-emerged in the country's political landscape, capitalizing on uncertainties and frustrations during the transition to democracy and growing distrust towards mainstream parties perceived as corrupt and still marked by communist legacies. The nationalist-extremist party Romania Mare, led by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, thus became the second most important political party in the early 2000s. This ultra-nationalist group voiced anti-Western sentiments in a context of European integration, as well as militarism and political dictatorship. Its name, referring to the nation-state of all Romanian speakers formed after World War I, illustrates its ultra-nationalist and anti-minority axis.

The ideology of the Greater Romania Party (PRM) was based on an exacerbated nationalism that, far from being limited to a mere glorification of the past, translated into a revanchist and ethnocentric vision of Romanian history and politics. Structured around a discourse blending nostalgia for the communist regime, openly xenophobic rhetoric, and rejection of the post-revolutionary political elites, this ideology was embedded in a narrative where Romania's territorial integrity was sacralized. This justified both the denunciation of minority claims, particularly those of the Hungarians, and the aspiration

to restore the unity of a national space that the party considered to have been amputated by historical contingencies. This territorial obsession went hand in hand with an uncompromising sovereigntism that, under the guise of defending the country's independence, was fueled by conspiracy theories in which the West, liberal elites, and secret groups – often associated with Zionist or Freemasonic networks – were blamed for Romania's economic and moral decline.

This ideological framework cannot be fully understood without considering the centrality of Orthodox Christianity in the PRM's vision, which elevated this religious tradition as a fundamental pillar of national identity and a bulwark against the corruption and presumed decadence of the modern world. Thus, the denunciation of the immorality of political elites was closely linked to diatribes against certain minorities, particularly the Roma and homosexuals, who were held responsible for the erosion of traditional values. Within this dynamic, the PRM, while sometimes adopting a populist discourse against social injustices, positioned itself less as a party of rupture and more as a reactionary force aspiring to a return to an old order, where a homogeneous and proud Romanian nation would no longer be subject to foreign influences and the liberal reforms imposed by the European Union.

The PRM's electorate reflected the fractures of a Romanian society in transition, where certain segments of the population – particularly affected by the economic and political upheavals of the post-communist era – saw in this party an alternative to marginalization and uncertainty. Composed largely of elderly individuals, members of the working class, and often less-educated citizens, this electorate was marked by a deep resentment toward the transformations following the fall of the communist regime, which they perceived not as a liberation but as a dispossession orchestrated by a corrupt elite and malevolent foreign influences.

Thus, the PRM managed to capture the discontent of former communist party officials, retired military personnel, and members of the Securitate, for whom the dissolution of the pre-1989 system resulted in a loss of status and influence. It also appealed to a broader segment of citizens disoriented by economic changes, who found in the party's nationalist rhetoric a form of refuge against the uncertainties of modernity.

By reaching out to this disillusioned electorate, the party went from 4-5% of the votes in 1992 and 1996 to a peak of 21% in 2000, then 14% in 2004. The factors behind this success are manifold. Firstly, it benefited from a fragmented political landscape in the 2000 elections, with weak center-right parties and an increasingly unpopular PDSR due to integration policies in the Euro-Atlantic space involving the closure of industries employing a large part of its traditional electorate. Additionally, the socio-economic situation and the disappointment of citizens with conventional parties unable to positively change their lives despite post-transition promises and hopes, as well as the charisma of its leader Tudor, also enabled Romania Mare to achieve this success. As a talented orator and provocative polemicist, Tudor had established himself as the embodiment of an anti-system stance that combined exacerbated nationalism, nostalgia for a mystified past, and the relentless denunciation of an elitist conspiracy allegedly responsible for Romania's moral and economic decline. However, it was precisely this personification of the party that, while ensuring its electoral rise, also precipitated its downfall. The organizational structure of the PRM, entirely shaped around the unquestioned authority of its leader, lacked any credible succession plan and proved incapable of surviving the authoritarian excesses and erratic decisions of its founder. Far from relying on a coherent ideological program or a sustainable institutional strategy, the PRM functioned essentially as a court orbiting around its leader,

where internal dissent was brutally suppressed and the successive departures of key figures gradually hollowed out the party.

Moreover, its electorate, far from being homogeneous or ideologically structured, was primarily driven by a sense of exclusion and social decline rather than genuine adherence to the party's doctrines. This is why, as the PRM sank into internal instability and its leader faced growing challenges to his authority from within, a significant portion of its voter base gradually shifted toward other populist formations. These new parties, such as the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP – DD), were able to capitalize on the same rejection of the elites and a renewed anti-system rhetoric. Thus, despite its initial rise to prominence, the influence and success of the far-right PRM were transient. Following its failure to secure any seats in the 2012 national elections, as well as in the 2014 EU elections, and with the passing of its leader, Vadim Tudor, the PRM gradually receded from the Romanian political sphere.

The electoral performance of the Greater Romania Party (PRM)
in the Senate elections from 1992 to 2020

Year	Election	PRM's Percentage of Votes
1992	Senate	3.86%
1996	Senate	4.54%
2000	Senate	21.01%
2004	Senate	13.63%
2008	Senate	3.57%
2012	Senate	1.47%
2016	Senate	2.95%
2020	Senate	0.65%

AUR's electoral performance in terms of both the percentage of votes it
received and the number of seats it won in each electoral body

Electoral Body	Percentage of Votes	Seats Won
Chamber of Deputies	9.17%	33
Senate	8.89%	14

However, the demise of this party did not signify the end of
nationalist themes in the Romanian political landscape. Other
secondary movements, with varying degrees of influence and
electoral success, have emerged with nationalist, populist, xen-
ophobic and far-right ideas.

The New Generation Party-Christian Democratic (PNG-CD)
emerged on the Romanian political scene in a context marked
by the decline of traditional nationalist parties, attracting an
electorate in search of an alternative to the wornout figures of
the far right. Initially founded by former Bucharest mayor
Viorel Lis, the party generated little enthusiasm until George
Becali took over its leadership in 2004, radically transforming
its ideological stance and public impact. Under his direction,
the PNG-CD swiftly shifted toward a rhetoric combining ex-
treme nationalism, open intolerance toward any form of diver-
sity, and a blatant instrumentalization of Orthodox Christian
values, which served less as a doctrinal foundation than as a
populist tool to rally those discontented with the system. In-
deed, while the party's rise was largely driven by Becali's dem-
agogic personality, he did not hesitate to draw upon the im-
agery of the Legionary Movement to give his political project a
more distinct identity, using symbols and slogans directly in-
spired by the legacy of the Iron Guard while adapting them to
his own opportunistic vision of power. The party's official
motto – "Serving the Cross and the Romanian Nation!" – re-
flected this fusion of mythologized ultranationalism and

dogmatic religious conservatism, which justified an exclusion-ary rhetoric targeting ethnic and sexual minorities, corrupt po-litical elites, and Western influences as existential threats to na-tional identity.

However, while the PNG-CD managed to attract a segment of nationalist voters disappointed by the PRM's decline, it struggled to establish itself as a lasting political force due to its lack of internal structure and extreme dependence on Becali's personality. This structural weakness, coupled with disappoint-ing electoral results and the rise of new populist formations such as the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP – DD), grad-ually relegated the PNG-CD to the political margins, until Be-cali decided to join the National Liberal Party (PNL), effec-tively abandoning his own party and precipitating its inevitable collapse.

The Everything for the Country Party (TPȚ), on the other hand, represents the ideological lineage of Legionarism, claim-ing a heritage defined by extreme nationalism, the exaltation of Orthodox Christian values, and a pronounced hostility to-ward all forms of diversity perceived as threats to Romanian identity. Although originally founded in 1993 under the name Party for the Homeland (PPP), it only gained significant polit-ical recognition in 2012, when it obtained the legal right to re-claim the historical name of the political wing of the Iron Guard, the fascist and ultranationalist movement of the inter-war period. However, this attempt at legitimization was soon met with opposition from judicial authorities, who initiated proceedings to dissolve the party due to its fascist and racist nature, thereby calling its institutional viability into question.

The TPȚ's ideology, firmly rooted in Legionary traditions, synthesizes ultranationalist principles, a deep attachment to popular and religious traditions, and a systematic rejection of perceived foreign influences – whether ethnic and sexual

minorities, international organizations, or Western sociopolitical trends associated with globalist conspiracies. Through this ideological stance, the TPȚ sought to position itself as an alternative to traditional nationalist parties, relying on a radical approach and a political identity shaped by symbols and rituals borrowed from the Iron Guard to attract voters seeking strong nationalistic markers. Although electorally marginal, the TPȚ's presence in Romanian public life reveals a deeper trend of Legionary discourse rehabilitation, which resonates with a segment of the population – particularly among educated young people drawn to the movement's mystical and anti-establishment dimension.

By adopting strategies inspired by the Iron Guard – such as organizing marches, nationalist commemorations, and spiritual retreats in Orthodox monasteries – the party has aimed to transcend conventional political frameworks, transforming itself into both a political and cultural movement that seeks to reactivate collective memory based on the myth of a pure and authentic Romania, allegedly threatened by internal and external forces. In this sense, the rise of the TPȚ does not so much signal the emergence of a major political actor as it does the persistent underground presence of an ultranationalist current in Romania, whose manifestations, though fluctuating, demonstrate a historical resilience despite institutional attempts to marginalize it.

The Noua Dreaptă (ND) movement, which emerged in 2000 and is often compared to the TPȚ, also aligns ideologically with the Iron Guard's legacy. However, it distinguishes itself through a structured network of activists both in Romania and abroad, particularly in Germany, Italy, and Moldova. This transnational reach, bolstered by a highly active digital presence – through websites, blogs, and even a dedicated YouTube channel for spreading its propaganda – reflects a deliberate

strategy to expand its influence beyond traditional party politics and establish a lasting ultranationalist discourse among educated youth, who are often drawn to its exaltation of a mythologized past and an ethno-religious identity perceived as being under threat.

ND also differentiates itself from the TPȚ by its explicit territorial claims, inspired by the borders of Greater Romania before 1940. This territorial obsession is evident both in the symbolic maps displayed in its propaganda materials and in the existence of an active Bessarabian branch in Moldova, reflecting a political project where the past is used as a central argument to legitimize an expansionist vision that is deeply hostile to national minorities, particularly Hungarians.

Although ND attempted to translate its militant activism into electoral engagement in 2011 by seeking official registration as the Nationalist Party, this effort was blocked by judicial authorities, highlighting the limits of its institutionalization. This rejection confirmed that ND's primary strength lies not in participating in electoral politics but in structuring grassroots actions – through work camps, demonstrations, and commemorative events. By leveraging such symbolic mobilizations and cultivating an imagery directly inspired by interwar Legionary ideology, ND aims to compensate for its lack of institutional representation with a strong and enduring social and cultural presence. This strategy is designed to foster an ideological climate in which radical far-right ideas continue to thrive, despite repeated electoral failures.

But nationalist ideas in Romania are not limited to these few fringe movements. For example, in 2016, Dragnea's Social Democratic Party already reactivated such subjects, with a hint of Euroscepticism. In 2018, it also adopted particularly conservative positions, proposing a referendum to define the family as a union between a man and a woman only – which failed.

While Dragnea was not able to create a solid conservative and nationalist alternative to the dominant pro-EU discourse, this dynamic could be altered by the rise of AUR, which emerged as the primary far-right party in Romania in 2020.

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) was founded in 2019 by George Simion, a former leader of an organization advocating for the unification of Romania and Moldova, and Claudiu Târziu, a close ally of ultraconservative circles who had mobilized strongly against abortion. Initially absent from traditional media, AUR gained prominence primarily on social media, using shocking and populist rhetoric, especially to criticize health measures during the pandemic crisis. Meanwhile, the party made its presence felt on the ground by organizing protests across the country. Thanks to this strategy, in 2020, AUR made a notable entry into Parliament with 10% of the votes.

Candidat	Voturi	Procent(~)
PARTIDUL SOCIAL DEMOCRAT	1.732.289	29,31 %
PARTIDUL NAȚIONAL LIBERAL	1.511.227	25,57 %
ALIANȚA USR PLUS	936.864	15,85 %
ALIANȚA PENTRU UNIREA ROMÂNILOR	541.938	9,17 %
UNIUNEA DEMOCRATĂ MAGHIARĂ DIN ROMÂNIA	348.262	5,89 %
PARTIDUL MIȘCAREA POPULARĂ	291.485	4,93 %
PARTIDUL PRO ROMÂNIA	244.227	4,13 %

table representing the electoral score of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in the December 2020 Romanian legislative elections. *Official Results. Data table: Permanent Electoral Authority.*

The AUR embodies an ideology rooted in traditional and conservative values, positioning itself as a staunch opponent of Marxism, multiculturalism, materialism, and diversity. The

party advocates for the defense of the traditional family, rejects gender studies, and exclusively supports marriage between a man and a woman. This approach is deeply rooted in a theocratic worldview where the Christian faith is seen as the pillar of European civilization, and AUR presents itself as the guardian and promoter of Christian values.

On the nationalist front, AUR advocates for the unification of Romania and Moldova, evoking a nostalgic and idealized image of "Greater Romania." This romanticized vision of history proposes the reunification of all Romanians beyond current borders, aiming to create a culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation-state. AUR uses this utopian vision to bolster its call for strong nationalism, firmly opposing immigration and ethnic minorities, which it views as threats to the nation. Historically, this victimization discourse targeted Jews and Roma, but it has increasingly focused on the Hungarian minority.

AUR vigorously criticizes the European Union, opposing military aid to Ukraine, which it perceives as an external conflict not directly concerning Romania. However, the party maintains its commitment to the Western bloc, notably supporting Romania's role in NATO. Additionally, it categorically rejects any ties with Russia, aligning with widespread Romanian skepticism towards Moscow, and has called for the closure of Russian diplomatic missions in Romania and the expulsion of the Russian ambassador.

AUR's discourse is also heavily influenced by conspiracy theories, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforcing its image as an anti-establishment party. Presenting itself as an alternative to a corrupt elite, AUR rejects alliances with traditional parties, positioning itself as a force for political renewal. Their positions are largely inspired by the Legionnaires, an influential far-right organization of the interwar period in Romania, which advocated for an ultranationalist and theocratic

vision based on the superiority of the Christian faith. However, unlike the Legionnaires, antisemitism has disappeared from AUR's discourse, likely due to the almost total absence of Jewish minorities in Romania. Today, AUR directs its hateful rhetoric against Roma, Hungarians, and the LGBTQ+ community. These groups are portrayed as scapegoats, accused of threatening the integrity and values of Romanian society, allowing AUR to channel popular frustrations and mobilize growing electoral support.

The AUR has seen growing success attributed to several converging factors that have exacerbated discontent and frustration among Romanian citizens. Firstly, Romania's political system is marked by significant volatility, fragmentation of traditional parties, and widespread corruption. Only 20% of Romanians trust their government, compared to a European average of 34%, placing the country fifth from the bottom in the European Union rankings. Additionally, only 30% of the population is satisfied with how democracy functions. These figures highlight a general disillusionment and growing frustration with political practices dominated by corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power. Repeated corruption scandals, political interference in judicial institutions, and attempts by political elites to manipulate laws have eroded public trust and fueled a sense of powerlessness among citizens. Efforts by authorities to reform these institutions have failed to restore public faith, aggravating feelings of disconnection and alienation between Romanians and those who are supposed to represent and defend their interests. AUR has capitalized on this discontent to present itself as an alternative to traditional parties, attracting votes from many disillusioned and disappointed voters.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided AUR with an opportunity to amplify its voice, amid fatigue and dissatisfaction with health measures. The party notably exploited conflicts between

churches and the state, portraying health restrictions on religious activities during lockdowns as persecution by a globalist elite, continuing a populist anti-establishment narrative. This period allowed AUR to gain visibility and lay the groundwork for introducing its other ideas into public discourse. Now that the pandemic has subsided, AUR is focusing on nationalism and scapegoating minorities.

"Visibility" and number of impressions for party social media communicators between Nov. 23rd and Dec 9th. Top 15 communicators in our sample. Data by Pulsar.

Facebook Page	Affiliation	Visibility Score	Impressions
George Simion	AUR	3,608	3,001,042
Partidul Naţional Liberal	PNL (institutional)	3,340	754,776
Rares Bogdan	PNL	2,844	631,180
Victor Ponta	PRO	1,655	321,486
Gabriela Firea	PSD	1,439	313,324
Alianţa Pentru Unirea Românilor	AUR (institutional)	1,403	309,760
Partidul Social Democrat	PSD (institutional)	1,325	233,596
Raluca Turcan	PNL	1,317	137,500
Marcel Ciolacu	PSD	1,127	216,766
Vlad Voiculescu	USR PLUS	984	208,274
Klaus Iohannis	current President	799	405,746
Ludovic Orban	PM, PNL	740	112,112
Eugen Tomac	PMP	733	42,966
Dacian Cioloş	USR PLUS	724	166,870
Violeta Alexandru	PNL	605	109,406

AUR has also succeeded through an effective social media campaign, bypassing the lack of television presence and limited access to traditional media. Using Facebook, the party reached an electorate often neglected by traditional parties, especially poorer rural populations. George Simion was more present in Facebook debates than the official PNL account, demonstrating the party's influence on social media. AUR has also launched an innovative app to enhance political engagement,

membership management, and local mobilization, contributing to the party's growing influence.

Media interest for AUR exploded near the elections.
Data and graph: Newswhip
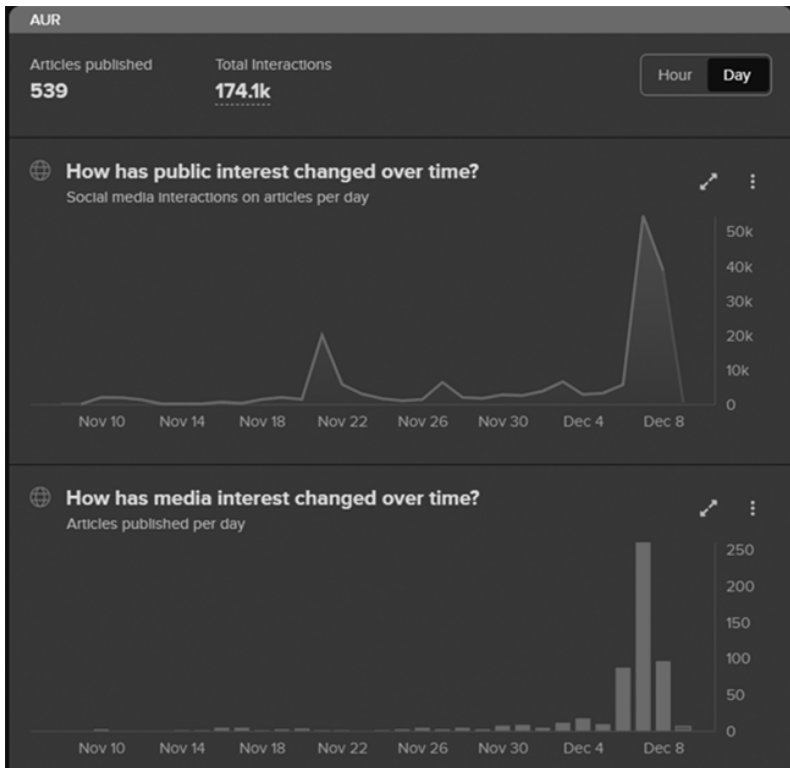
Finally, the major parties in power have also contributed to creating the conditions that facilitated the rise of extremism in Romania. Since the 2016 legislative elections, they have been accused of attempting to silence reformist parties and voices,

such as USR, which gained popularity as an alternative to traditional parties perceived as corrupt. To this end, the strategy employed is, on the one hand, to make the liberal opposition invisible – such as the USD, boycotted by most media controlled by the ruling elite – and on the other hand, to favor opposition from the far right, to build a "front" opposition, presented as potentially as destructive as possible, by giving media space to populist leaders like George Simion (AUR) or Diana Sosoaca (SOS Romania). At the same time, the ruling coalition regularly emphasizes the dangers of extremist parties, portrayed as having more weight than they do, with the consent and for the benefit of those who control the media space. The strategy appears aimed at reinforcing the status quo – that is, the maintenance of power by the conservative-socialist system – to be perceived as the only reasonable choice for voters faced with extremism, by making another alternative, that of liberal and democratic opposition, invisible.

AUR's electorate is primarily composed of men aged 18 to 30, often with lower levels of education. The party has managed to capture the votes of voters disillusioned with traditional politics or concerned about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to its populist and antiestablishment rhetoric. In 2020, 30% of voters were disillusioned with politics and had not voted for several years. AUR has also mobilized populist and conspiracy currents, including those opposed to masks, vaccines, LGBTQ+ rights, etc. Its supporters include ultra-conservative, nationalist, religious activists close to the Orthodox Church, from neo-Legionnaire and sovereigntist movements. Geographically, AUR has particularly mobilized voters in Transylvania, Moldavia, and Dobruja, especially in regions with a significant Hungarian population, attracting votes from Romanians who feel marginalized there. Furthermore, with a quarter of Romanians abroad casting their votes for the party,

AUR's rhetoric resonates strongly within the Romanian diaspora, which has been forced to migrate due to economic difficulties, low wages, and limited job opportunities.

Demographic	Percentage
Gender (Men)	61%
Age (18-30 years old)	36%
Education (High School Graduates)	62%
Employment Status (Employed)	40%
Attitude towards Green Pass (Opposed)	80%
Attitude towards COVID-19 Vaccination (Opposed)	65%

In the wake of its ascent in 2020, AUR's popularity has continued to surge, solidifying its position as the dominant force on the far-right spectrum in Romania. Attempts by the far-right party Sosoaca to court AUR's voters have yielded minimal impact, given Sosoaca's overt pro-Russian stance in a country where a substantial majority – 60-70% – express apprehension about a potential Russian invasion. Having established its dominance, AUR is now pivoting towards the center and is on a path to normalization. While it already commands strong appeal among far-right voters, who find few alternatives, it is now crafting a centrist discourse tailored to individuals discontented with social issues but wary of overt far-right nationalism. This demographic is increasingly radicalized due to factors such as soaring inflation, apprehensions about a possible Russian incursion, government ineptitude, and pervasive corruption. Furthermore, even while in the minority in Parliament, AUR is gaining increasing influence on Romanian politics: in a context of extreme political

polarization, mainstream parties are now willing to collaborate with AUR to achieve certain majorities, as evidenced by AUR's role in the November 2021 no-confidence vote against Florin Cîțu's cabinet, partnering with the traditional PSD party. The extreme electoral volatility that has characterized Romania for several years, hindering progress and decision-making, is thus being used to AUR's advantage, making it a party mainstream parties are willing to engage with and collaborate with despite its extreme positions.

Although far-right groups in Romania currently appear marginalized on the electoral scene and struggle to surpass the thresholds imposed by the proportional representation system – despite the rise of AUR – it would be a mistake to conclude that their ideas have lost all political relevance or that they no longer resonate within Romanian society. In fact, several underlying dynamics indicate that, even if these political formations fail to establish themselves directly, their rhetoric, themes, and worldview still permeate a significant part of public debate and the country's political culture.

First, it is important to emphasize that the relative stability of the Romanian political landscape, marked by the dominance of large coalitions such as the USL in the 2012 elections, does not imply the absence of ideological tensions or underlying currents capable of fueling a resurgence of radical nationalism. The inability of far-right parties to capitalize on recent political crises, while it may be interpreted as a sign of their structural weakness, should not obscure the fact that their traditional electorate does not disappear but rather tends to shift towards other populist forces, such as PP-DD. Although not explicitly claiming far-right affiliations, these parties do not hesitate to draw from a similar rhetorical repertoire, playing on identity fears, rejection of elites, and denunciation of foreign influences.

Moreover, it is undeniable that the general climate in Romania remains conducive to the dissemination of discriminatory and xenophobic ideas, particularly through a vast network of media and digital platforms. Under the guise of patriotism or the defense of national traditions, these platforms propagate openly racist, homophobic, and ultranationalist discourse. The importance of this media space should not be underestimated, as it plays a fundamental role in legitimizing ideas that would otherwise remain on the fringes of society. By providing supporters of these movements with a sense of belonging and community, enabling them to mobilize their base rapidly for coordinated actions, and offering them a platform where their views can be shared without restriction, these digital spaces contribute to the gradual normalization of an exclusionary worldview that fosters mistrust of democratic institutions.

Furthermore, Romanian society's attitude towards certain minorities reveals a strong predisposition to accept exclusionary rhetoric. Public opinion studies indicate a worrying level of prejudice against LGBT+ and Roma communities, reflecting a relative societal tolerance for discriminatory discourse. This situation is all the more concerning given that the indifference – or even complacency – of authorities in the face of openly racist or revisionist statements by certain public figures contributes to the normalization of such discourse. When prominent politicians, including former ministers and senators, make statements denying the Holocaust or stigmatizing entire segments of the population without facing significant consequences, it sends a clear signal about the degree of acceptability of such positions in the public sphere.

Finally, a phenomenon specific to the Romanian political landscape – known as *traseism politic* (political opportunism) – fosters a blurring of ideological boundaries and allows former far-right figures to integrate into more mainstream political

parties without renouncing their past convictions. This transfer of individuals, far from leading to the disappearance of extremist ideas, often results in their dissemination within moderate parties, contributing to a latent radicalization of their platforms and rhetoric. Furthermore, in a context of economic crisis and growing distrust towards European and international institutions, sovereigntist and anti-globalization themes – historically championed by the far right – are increasingly resonating with a population seeking clear-cut solutions to complex structural problems.

Thus, while the Romanian far right, as an autonomous political force, may not yet mirror the scale or consolidation seen in other European contexts, this absence of a dominant far-right party should not be mistaken for democratic resilience or ideological immunity. Romania's political culture remains deeply shaped by a combination of authoritarian legacies, fragmented party systems, and public disillusionment with democratic institutions. Unlike in Western Europe, where the far right typically rises through long-standing anti-immigrant discourses and structured party-building, the Romanian case reveals a more subterranean pattern of radicalization – one that draws from pre- and post-communist nationalist currents, the legacy of national communism under Ceaușescu, and the residual valorization of interwar figures such as Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Antonescu.

This latent ideological terrain has enabled the surprising ascent of actors such as Călin Georgescu, a former UN official who in recent years has made overtly sympathetic references to Romania's fascist past while positioning himself as a spiritual and political alternative to the existing party establishment. Though not formally affiliated with any mainstream party, Georgescu's rising visibility in public discourse – particularly within nationalist and conspiratorial circles – reflects the

ongoing rehabilitation of authoritarian historical figures and the porous boundary between anti-system populism and fascist nostalgia.

More structurally significant has been the rise of AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), which stunned observers in the 2020 parliamentary elections by winning nearly 9% of the vote despite minimal campaign infrastructure and exclusion from mainstream media. AUR represents a new configuration of Romanian far-right politics: combining anti-system populism, aggressive cultural conservatism, and Orthodox religious nationalism with Euroscepticism and historical revisionism. The party has built a support base among disenfranchised youth, rural voters, and members of the Romanian diaspora – particularly in Italy and Spain – who feel disconnected from domestic political developments but remain emotionally invested in national identity and Orthodox values. AUR's discourse relies heavily on anti-elitist sentiment, the defense of "traditional values", and opposition to "gender ideology", globalism, and Western liberal norms.

Crucially, the Romanian far right differs from cases like Hungary or Poland in that it has not (yet) consolidated power through executive capture or systematic party-state fusion. Instead, it operates more diffusely: through populist parties like AUR, independent figures like Georgescu, and online ecosystems that amplify nationalist, conspiratorial, and anti-modern rhetoric. Romania's weak party system, low trust in institutions, and a judiciary that remains susceptible to political pressure create an environment where radical actors can gain influence even without institutional dominance.

In this light, Romania's vulnerability to far-right resurgence is less about immediate electoral conquest and more about ideological normalization. The increasing mainstreaming of exclusionary nationalism, authoritarian nostalgia, and clericalism

in public discourse suggests that far-right ideas are not simply external threats to the democratic order but internalized features of a post-transition political culture still grappling with its historical legacies. If left unchallenged, these dynamics may pave the way for deeper illiberal transformations, not through a single dominant movement, but through the gradual erosion of liberal-democratic norms from within.

5. *Conclusion*

The comparative analysis of far-right mobilization in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria demonstrates that despite variations in historical trajectories, institutional frameworks, and political cultures, these countries share structural conditions that have facilitated the rise and persistence of far-right actors. By employing a comparative methodology that integrates Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), Comparative Area Studies (CAS), and historical institutionalism, this study has identified the mechanisms through which far-right parties emerge, consolidate, and interact with broader political systems in Southeastern Europe. The findings highlight that while far-right movements in these three countries exhibit core ideological elements of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, their distinct national contexts shape divergent electoral strategies, ideological orientations, and patterns of political influence.

The study confirms that far-right actors in Southeastern Europe capitalize on crises – economic, political, and identity-based – to mobilize support. Economic instability, austerity-induced discontent, and socio-political grievances have created fertile ground for populist radical right parties, which present themselves as the sole defenders of the "pure" people against

corrupt elites and external threats. While in Western Europe, far-right mobilization is frequently associated with anxieties over migration, multiculturalism, and post-materialist value shifts – such as debates around identity, climate policy, and gender – these factors often intersect with concerns about national sovereignty and political alienation in the East as well. In Southeastern Europe, however, far-right politics have been more deeply embedded in nationalist revivalism, historical revisionism, and widespread distrust of post-communist democratic governance. This regional specificity underscores the importance of historical path dependence in shaping contemporary far-right politics, as seen in Romania's legacy of interwar fascism and national communism, Bulgaria's ethno-nationalist discourse rooted in post-Ottoman structures and communist-era authoritarianism, and Greece's far-right resurgence informed not only by the legacy of the military junta (1967-1974), but also by the interwar authoritarian regime of Ioannis Metaxas and long-standing ethno-religious nationalism embedded in post-war political culture.

While all three countries have experienced significant far-right electoral breakthroughs in recent years, the ideological positioning of these movements differs. The Greek far right has historically exhibited both radical and extreme right elements, as illustrated by the now-banned Golden Dawn, whose violent extra-parliamentary activities and overt embrace of neo-Nazi symbols and rhetoric positioned it closer to National Socialist and fascist movements than to conventional populist radical right parties. In contrast, Romania and Bulgaria's far-right movements, while explicitly nationalist and exclusionary, have remained within the radical right spectrum, operating within the democratic framework while simultaneously seeking to erode liberal democratic norms from within. Nonetheless, fluid boundaries between the radical and extreme right persist,

as certain factions within these parties oscillate between electoral politics and extra-parliamentary activism, a phenomenon observed in the ideological hybridization of radical right populism and authoritarian ethno-nationalism.

Despite cross-national ideological similarities, the far right in these countries remains only partially integrated at the transnational level, with nationalist movements frequently prioritizing domestic agendas. However, recent developments suggest a growing degree of cross-border coordination, particularly around shared Eurosceptic, anti-globalist, and anti-migration platforms. Far-right actors in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria have engaged in symbolic alliances, mutual public endorsements, and joint appearances at international far-right forums such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the World Congress of Families, and events affiliated with the Identity and Democracy Foundation. AUR, for example, has increasingly cultivated ties with Poland's PiS, Hungary's Fidesz, and American MAGA-aligned actors, including participation in CPAC Budapest and collaborative declarations on 'Christian Europe.' These interactions signal a willingness to align on select narratives. Yet, they still fall short of the institutionalized coalitions seen in Western Europe – such as Identity and Democracy (ID) or the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the European Parliament – highlighting a strategic but still uneven attempt at transnational far-right alignment in Southeastern Europe.

While Bulgarian and Greek far-right actors often adopt pro-Russian stances – particularly in relation to foreign policy and critiques of NATO – Romania presents a more ambivalent position. Although Romanian far-right formations like AUR occasionally invoke nationalist rhetoric that aligns with Russian interests, they typically refrain from openly endorsing pro-Kremlin positions due to deep-seated historical antagonisms and

public sensitivities related to regional sovereignty and Russian influence. This complex stance limits the potential for a cohesive regional far-right alliance and underscores the importance of national context in shaping ideological alignments.

The study also demonstrates that far-right movements in Southeastern Europe engage in strategic scapegoating, with different minority groups serving as primary targets of nationalist exclusionary rhetoric. While Greek far-right parties focus primarily on external migration, portraying Middle Eastern and African refugees as existential threats to national sovereignty, the Bulgarian far right centers its discourse on internal minorities, particularly Turks and Roma, constructing them as demographic and cultural enemies of the nation. In Romania, the far right mobilizes against Roma and the Hungarian minority, reinforcing historical territorial anxieties and ethno-nationalist narratives. These variations illustrate how national contexts condition far-right rhetorical strategies, reinforcing the adaptability of far-right actors to specific socio-political landscapes.

Furthermore, the study highlights that while the far right in all three countries operates within a populist framework, its relationship with religion varies. Niki in Greece represents one of the most religiously motivated far-right parties, advocating for Orthodox Christian supremacy, whereas Bulgarian and Romanian far-right movements incorporate Christian conservatism within broader nationalist discourse but do not prioritize clerical authority to the same extent. This divergence reflects national variations in church-state relations and the degree to which religious identity is weaponized for political purposes.

Ultimately, the findings of this study contribute to broader debates on the far right's role in democratic backsliding, political radicalization, and party system transformation in Europe. The case studies of Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria illustrate
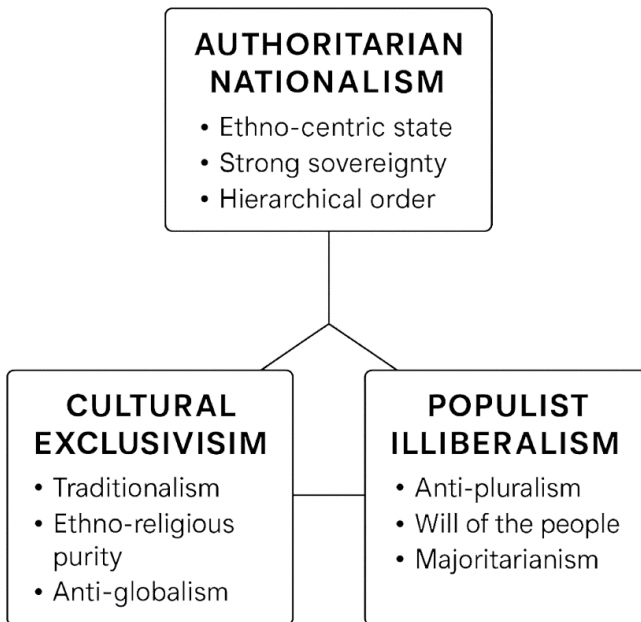
how historical legacies, economic instability, and institutional weaknesses create opportunities for far-right actors to enter the political mainstream, leveraging crisis-driven discontent and nationalist nostalgia to erode democratic norms. However, the study also underscores the limits of far-right consolidation, as factionalism, ideological extremism, and internal contradictions often prevent these movements from sustaining long-term electoral dominance. While far-right parties in Southeastern Europe continue to reshape political discourse and influence mainstream political agendas, their capacity to fully institutionalize and dominate political systems remains contingent on broader structural and historical factors.

This comparative approach reinforces the necessity of analyzing far-right mobilization beyond Western-centric frameworks, recognizing regional specificities and historical contingencies in shaping contemporary radical right trajectories. The findings suggest that while far-right actors in Southeastern Europe are part of a broader European trend of radical right-wing resurgence, their evolution remains deeply embedded in national and regional political dynamics, shaped by historical path dependencies, institutional legacies, and socio-economic grievances. As far-right movements continue to adapt to shifting political landscapes, understanding their interplay with mainstream politics, electoral volatility, and governance challenges will remain essential for assessing the future of democracy in Southeastern Europe and beyond.

Building upon the insights generated by this comparative study, the far right in Southeastern Europe can be more accurately conceptualized not as a static or uniform ideological bloc, but as a dynamic field of political actors situated at the intersection of three interrelated pillars: *authoritarian nationalism*, *populist illiberalism*, and *cultural exclusivism*. To capture the ideological dynamics specific to the far right in Southeastern

Europe, this study proposes an alternative to Western-centric definitional models. Rather than relying solely on nativism and populism, the far right in this region is more accurately conceptualized as operating through a triadic structure of authoritarian nationalism, populist illiberalism, and cultural exclusivism. These elements do not function independently, but interact as mutually reinforcing pillars of political mobilization, grounded in legacies of authoritarianism and post-communist disillusionment.

The Ideological Triad of the Southeastern European Far Right

AUTHORITARIAN NATIONALISM
- Ethno-centric state
- Strong sovereignty
- Hierarchical order

CULTURAL EXCLUSIVISIM
- Traditionalism
- Ethno-religious purity
- Anti-globalism

POPULIST ILLIBERALISM
- Anti-pluralism
- Will of the people
- Majoritarianism

This scheme illustrates the interplay between authoritarian nationalism, populist illiberalism, and cultural exclusivism – the three constitutive logics that structure far-right mobilization in Southeastern Europe. These dimensions, while analytically distinct, operate in dynamic synergy, shaping strategies of exclusion, state power, and national identity across the region.

- *Authoritarian nationalism* refers to a vision of political order in which the state derives its legitimacy from an ethnically homogeneous national community, typically tied to historical myths and sovereignty claims. It privileges a hierarchical conception of citizenship and views pluralism as a threat to the coherence of the nation.
- *Populist illiberalism* combines the rhetoric of majoritarian democracy with the rejection of liberal norms such as minority rights, judicial independence, and press freedom. It constructs a moral binary between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" and often seeks to delegitimize opposition voices by framing them as enemies of the nation.
- *Cultural exclusivism* entails a defense of a rigid and essentialized national identity, rooted in language, religion, and traditional values, that excludes perceived outsiders – immigrants, ethnic minorities, or cosmopolitan elites – from full membership in the national community.

Rather than existing as discrete categories, these dimensions function as mutually reinforcing logics of political mobilization, adapted to national contexts. As such, a revised definition of the far right must account not only for ideological content but also for political function, strategic flexibility, and the capacity to colonize mainstream political space without necessarily overtaking it. This model offers a more empirically grounded and regionally sensitive framework than rigid taxonomies, highlighting how the far right simultaneously exploits

crises, reshapes democratic discourse, and reconfigures the normative boundaries of legitimacy.

While Cas Mudde's influential definition – centered on nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – remains foundational for Western European analysis, it requires contextual adaptation for Southeastern Europe. In this region, far-right actors function not only through exclusionary ideologies, but also through post-authoritarian continuities and legacies, under-institutionalized democratic systems, and unhealed collective memories.

Given the region's intricate historical legacies and institutional arrangements, the far right in Southeastern Europe can be analytically defined as a constellation of political actors whose strategies and discursive practices are shaped by authoritarian nationalism, populist illiberalism, and a commitment to cultural exclusivism. These movements draw on legacies of authoritarian rule, ethno-nationalist mythologies, and collective memories of national victimhood, exploiting crises of democratic legitimacy, post-communist disillusionment, and geopolitical anxieties. Unlike their Western European counterparts – where far-right politics tend to emerge in relatively consolidated democracies and stable party systems – far-right actors in Southeastern Europe often operate within fluid or semi-consolidated systems, employing a hybrid repertoire of formal political participation and extra-institutional mobilization. As such, they blur the line between democratic engagement and systemic subversion, positioning themselves as both critics and contenders within fragile liberal orders.

This revised definition is most applicable to post-communist democracies characterized by:
- Delayed democratic consolidation (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia), where democratic norms are either not fully institutionalized or are vulnerable to executive overreach, weak

judicial autonomy, and politicized media landscapes. In such environments, far-right actors thrive not only by challenging liberal democratic values but also by exploiting the ambiguities and loopholes within transitional political systems. These countries often exhibit hybrid regime features, including volatile party systems, weak civil society oversight, and fragile rule-of-law mechanisms that allow illiberal political strategies to gain traction under a democratic veneer.

- Hybrid regimes or fragile liberal institutions, where formal democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian practices, such as politically subordinated judiciaries, selective law enforcement, curtailed media independence, and blurred boundaries between state and party interests. In such contexts, democratic legitimacy is maintained through elections and constitutional facades, yet the substance of liberal democracy – pluralism, accountability, and rights protection – is systematically undermined. These fragile institutional ecosystems are fertile ground for far-right actors, who exploit legal ambiguity and institutional weakness to advance exclusionary, nationalist agendas while presenting themselves as legitimate contenders within ostensibly democratic frameworks.

- High degrees of politicized state captured defined as the systematic appropriation of public institutions, legal frameworks, and regulatory authorities by partisan or clientelist interests – alongside enduring legacies of authoritarian rule that continue to influence political behavior, bureaucratic culture, and public expectations of governance. These structural features not only constrain democratic accountability but also provide fertile ground for far-right actors who present themselves as corrective forces against corrupt elites, while often perpetuating illiberal practices through populist rhetoric and institutional manipulation.

Specifically, we refer to the constellation of post-1989 EU entrants and neighboring Southeastern European states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and arguably Hungary, where democratic consolidation has been uneven, party systems remain volatile, and historical experiences of authoritarianism continue to shape political imaginaries. These systems often exhibit hybrid institutional characteristics, neither fully liberal nor explicitly autocratic, within which far-right actors are able to thrive by exploiting ambivalences in legal and political frameworks, reshaping cultural narratives, and aligning opportunistically with both domestic grievances and transnational illiberal currents. The applicability of this model lies in its ability to account for the fluid and adaptive nature of far-right politics in societies marked by contested statehood, identity-based cleavages, and weak safeguards against democratic erosion.

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Latin America at The Crossroads: Populism and Alternatives to the Crises

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Abstract. Latin America has often been considered a political laboratory for populism. In recent years, new left-wing governments and the emergence of an alternative right-wing in many countries may have theoretically and analytically changed the notion of populism. Do they have something in common with 20th-century populism? To address this question, the theoretical framework on populism will first be presented to provide analytical tools that introduce categories and key elements. This article will explore the structural causes of populism in Latin America. Three main perspectives will be considered by exploring populist literature: (neo)liberal, new left, and alternative right. Finally, contemporary populist regimes (both left and right-wing) will be analysed to bring about a theoretical and analytical synthesis.

Keywords: Populism; Neoliberalism; Authoritarianism; Anarcho-capitalism; Libertarianism.

Introduction

In recent years, extreme right-wing governments have spread through Latin American countries. The recent election of Javier Milei in Argentina (December 2023), the re-election of

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Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (February 2024), and the election of Daniel Noboa in Ecuador (November 2023) seem to confirm the emergence of a new right-wing or alternative right hegemony, combining new discourse and practice. Does this correspond to a new category of populism? Does it have something in common with 20th-century classic populism? Are these regimes compatible with democracy? At present, it is premature to provide a definitive answer. However, to propose a more detailed analysis, it is necessary to include the left-wing tradition, as Latin America also has a long-standing tradition of left-wing populist leaders and governments.

In this sense, the new left-wing governments headed by Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador (July 2018) and his successor, Claudia Scheinbaum (June 2024) in Mexico, Gabriel Boric (November 2021) in Chile, Gustavo Petro (June 2022) in Colombia, Luis Arce (October 2020) in Bolivia, Xiomara Castro (December 2021) in Honduras, and the return of Lula Inácio da Silva (October 2022) in Brazil may confirm the persistence of the left-wing populist tradition in Latin American countries. But again, should they be considered essentially populist regimes? Do they share any elements with the first generation of populism and the 21st-century populist waves?

1. *Theoretical Framework and Perspectives: Latin American Literature Review on Populism / Studies on Populism*

To respond to these questions, this article will explore literature focused on Latin American populism, considering its long-standing tradition in Political Science, International Relations, Sociology, and Economics. First, populism is a political and historical category: it is an analytical concept and a historiographic category (Zanatta, 2004) that emerged in Latin

American studies "as identity-based reactions to the crisis of liberal democracy in the name of a mythical people. It is obvious that they are different in different historical contexts" (Zanatta, 2016).

There is often an interesting gap between Latin American literature and global literature on populism, highlighting idiosyncrasies and specificities in its history, crossing politics, economics, and culture. Moreover, Latin American literature focuses on nation-building processes, independence, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, modernization and democratization processes, and the market.

In this study, we opt for a non-dogmatic approach and definition of populism. For this reason, populism will be analysed in a non-pejorative manner, as pejorative and moral approaches may often obscure scientific analysis and limit its scope. Furthermore, we consider populism as an ongoing concept, evolving with social and political changes.

Comparing the first generation of populism in Latin America (mid-20th century) and 21st-century populism, we will provide key interpretative elements that may highlight similarities and differences. The new waves of populism in Latin American countries are summarized into four main waves: a) far-right-wing populism; b) left-wing "Socialism of the 21st Century"; c) alternative right populism; d) left-wing 2.0. By presenting each category in the second half of this article, we will also stress the boundaries between populism, authoritarianism, and fascism, as possible degenerations of the populist regime.

In general, we consider that populism is not fully equivalent to an authoritarian regime or a pure fascist regime, but they may converge towards hybrid regimes, especially in recent years. For this reason, political science may study these political doctrines, considering their hybridization.

In recent years, the main literature from Latin America and the Western world has often shifted its analysis to the boundaries with fascism, post-fascism, and neo-fascism. Populism in Latin American countries may in some way converge with each of these, without being fully encompassed by any single one. Nowadays, it is quite difficult to define boundaries between far-right populism, alternative right, and far-right (Stefanoni, 2022, p.39).

Populist studies also require determining the main differences between right-wing and left-wing regimes within political cleavages. Does populism transcend these political categories? Does this cleavage explain anything about the Latin American political party system?

According to our theoretical framework (Vilas, 2003; Germani, 2003; Ronsavallon, 2020; Laclau, 2005), we summarise that this research will lead to a study on populism based on multidimensional and multidisciplinary approaches:

a) Power and Quality of Leadership: messianism, charisma of the leader, based on extraordinary capacities and qualities of leaders.
b) Leadership Style and Emotions: the affective dimension of emotions, rationality, and irrationality.
c) Ideology and Political Strategy: Performative and communicative dimensions, normative aspects, and communication tools. "Direct democracy" between the leader and the people to bypass other political or social intermediaries.
d) Political Discourse Towards the Masses: Unifying and divisive rhetoric, "Us *vs.* Them," addressing both internal and external threats.
e) Social Alliances: Corporatism, close relations with the people, special relations with armed forces, and religions: the dialectic between inclusion and exclusion.

f) Plebiscitarian Democracy: Procedural democracy, elections, and constituent assembly elections as means of legitimacy.
g) Checks and Balances for Democracy: Constituent power, hyper-presidentialism, and clashes with the judiciary system, legislative power, opposition, and mass media. The leader demonstrates unifying power against internal and external threats.

2. *Structural Causes*

There is a general interest in the literature in understanding why Latin America should be considered the laboratory par excellence of populism, from its origins to the present day. Key answers may be found in nation-building, democratisation, modernisation processes, and market expansion, persisting among conflicts, inequalities, exclusion, and social crises (Germani, 2003; Di Tella, 1965). Indeed, from the early beginnings of Latin American populism, we see the emergence of extraordinary leaders (e.g., Perón, Haya de la Torre, Gaitán, Vargas, and Cárdenas) who call for a special relationship with the people, overcoming any political and social intermediation, and proposing an alternative power to the oligarchic and elite establishment.

In our approach, we may explain populism's origins by using an analogy with market rules, based on the "supply and demand" of populism in any society. Political, economic, and social crises may increase the social demand for a populist leader, called upon to end long-standing crises.

By focusing on history and political categories, populism was a key process for modernisation in Latin American countries. Populism was a form of authoritarian domination that included those excluded from politics (Germani, 2003). From its

origins, populism has incorporated social inclusion as a core element, required to build consensus with the electorate.

In this sense, populism has also been crucial for the expansion of democracy: populist leaders have always led the struggles for universal suffrage, civic, and economic rights. In Latin American contemporary history, populism emerged as a key moment for the expansion of democratisation processes. Indeed, populist leaders moved against elite theory (Mosca, 1923, 1945, Pareto, 1916, 1974, and Michels, 2008) and oligarchy in general. Democratisation was equally required for the modernization of the state.

In Latin American countries, the common scenario in the 1930s-1950s contributed to the birth of populism: in general, most nation-states in Latin America were not fully democratic, while oligarchic power maintained the establishment. In that context, populism emerged as a credible alternative to establish a new hegemony.

Populist leaders reinforced economic growth and social welfare, especially through industrialisation via import substitution[2] (ISI). By ISI, populist leaders used market regulation as a political and social tool. In fact, the mixed economy with a strong state-nation and regulatory power allowed for financing social interventionism, income redistribution, and a new generation of political, social, and labour rights (e.g., universal suffrage, strike rights, working holidays). By combining corporatism and patronage, including the active role of the main trade unions, populist leaders established a new regime through social mobilisation and nationalism. In international relations,

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[2] The Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) was a development strategy focusing on promoting domestic production of previously imported goods to foster industrialisation (Bussell, Britannica). For more information, see Cardoso and Faletto (1969), Marini (1969, 1973), and Gunder Frank (1979).

populist leaders also opted for a non-aligned foreign policy, combining nationalism and anti-imperialism.

In general, populist literature stresses the social effects of democratic *malaise*, facing incomplete democratisation processes:

a) Wounded or incomplete democratisation (fragility of institutions and incomplete separation of powers);
b) Polarised democracy, according to political cleavages (Rokkan, Lipset, 1967);
c) Populism as an alternative to crises and establishment power: against the status quo and oligarchic power;
d) Illiberal/antiliberal liberalism;
e) Systemic crises: combining economic, social, political, and environmental crises.

In recent times, democratic crises also arise from the emergence of "illiberal liberalism." Through this oxymoron, Latin America is presented as a key element to understand the rise of the Alternative Right, which might be hegemonic in the coming decades.

3. *Latin American Perspectives on Populism*

In general, the Latin American literature on populism varies across different theoretical approaches and depends on each national political process and its evolution. Indeed, there are different perceptions and political sensibilities in populist studies, as well as varying appreciations of their leaders. In this article, we summarise the vast literature on populism using three

main perspectives³: a) (Neo)liberal; b) New Left; c) Alternative Right.

a. The (Neo)Liberal Perspective

The (neo)liberal perspective generally has a negative view of populism. Liberal and (neo)liberal scholars (Naím and Smith, 2000) focus on the values, structures, and formal mechanisms of liberal democracy, with the free market being a key element in their analysis. Therefore, the three main variables are: free market, free elections, and balance of powers. For these reasons, populism is mainly considered an obstacle that might alter and diminish free election processes. Populist leaders generally concentrate and centralize their own power, which can partially restrict and limit electoral competition. Single-party competition (or a limited multiparty system) alters electoral competition; strong leadership tools, political co-option through trade unions, and corporative measures may affect liberal democracy in general.

 The second key variable is the maintenance of the free market. Historically, populism has played an active role in economics, combining nationalism, protectionism, corporatism, state regulation, and interventionism. Subsidy schemes are essential parts of the populist agenda. Through state regulatory control and interventionism, populism can build social consensus and consolidate an electoral base by improving the wealth and social conditions of the lower and middle classes. In effect, populism has used the social agenda as a core element of its

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³ Of course, this is a "simplistic" synthesis that leaves out the nuances of Latin American literature on populism. However, it is useful to summarise the literature review using these three main approaches, acknowledging the contradictory and ambivalent sensibilities regarding populism.

consensus scheme: by improving their material conditions, populist leaders build loyalty with the people.

The third key element that liberalism and (neo)liberalism criticise in populism is its impact on the balance of powers, a core element for the persistence of liberal democracy. Populism in Latin America has often imposed limits on the structural, nominal, and functional elements of democracy. These approaches prioritise formal and operational democracy. In this regard, populist leaders may interfere with legislative, electoral, media, and judiciary powers, limiting the traditional separation of powers and checks and balances in democracy. The rights of opposition parties and movements may not be guaranteed, with political and judicial persecution being very common.

For all these key elements, according to the (neo)liberal perspective, populism is considered a degenerative form of liberal democracy, irreconcilable with democratic values and standards, regardless of whether it is a left-wing or right-wing populist regime.

b. The New Left Perspective

In contrast, the New Left literature has a different perception of populism. It may vary in a dialectical approach, oscillating between two opposite streams: populism may contribute strengthen to democracy through its democratising effects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018), and at the same time, it may be considered a degeneration of democracy (Acosta, 2015; Prada, 2011; Muñoz, 2014; López, 2016; Sierra, 2017).

These fluctuations may vary depending on each political doctrine, leadership, and regime. In the positive perception, populism may emerge as an alternative and response to crises,

an organic crisis in Gramscian terms: a populist leader may provide responses to social and economic crises. Populism may also aggregate a new political center against a weakened and disenfranchised political class, establishing a new political hegemony.

In the first bloc, we summarise theoretical and analytical approaches towards the new populist wave in the 21st century, particularly related to the Socialism of the 21st Century and, most recently, the second wave of progressive Latin American governments since 2018.

Most scholars of the New Left perspective analyse the emergence of the "progressive" governments that flourished in Latin America with hope: they could have represented the end of the "*larga noche neoliberal*" and the possible refoundation of the nation-state, against corruption and the establishment's hegemony.

These scholars focus on the uprisings of Hugo Chávez's governments in Venezuela (1998-2013), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007-2017), and Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006-2019). Latin American literature also includes a different strand on "moderate" populism, such as the Argentinian governments of Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007-2015), the Paraguayan government of Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), and the Brazilian governments of Lula Inácio da Silva (2003-2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), as well as the Honduran government of Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009).

These perspectives are linked by their focus on the positive effects on democracy and the state. During the New Left Wave at the beginning of the 21st century, Latin America became a political laboratory for global radical left movements: optimism and hope were the most general commentary of the early governments. Social movements and radical left parties spread in Western Europe, combining slogans with Latin American

Bolivarianism. Greek Syriza and Spanish Podemos were influenced by this radical discourse of the Socialism of the 21st Century, particularly its anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric[4].

The New Left perspective research primarily emphasises the positive effects on democracy and the state's regulatory mandate in economics, which allows for social redistribution and welfare improvements.

They also highlight the positive impact of democratic expansion. In this context, constituent power and political and economic stabilisation are considered essential elements for a complete democracy. Reforms such as E-voting, new constitutions, and the emergence of a new generation of rights are seen as significant social achievements, particularly for the lower classes.

These elements are part of the necessary democratisation process in the face of an unfulfilled democracy. Populism may contribute to radicalising democracy, as the full process of democratisation (Moore, 1973) has not yet been achieved.

The concentration of power in the leader and hyper-presidentialism is mediated by the social agenda of populist left-wing governments. Indeed, there is also a new generation of rights: economic, social, and environmental. In this sense, populism improves the general conditions of citizenship by expanding democratic functioning and providing political, social, and economic rights to the working class and the most vulnerable citizens.

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[4] According to Kioupkiolis, the Greek Syriza and the Spanish Podemos are influenced by Latin American left-wing populism. Kioupkiolis (2016) "Podemos: the Ambiguous Promises of Left-wing Populism in Contemporary Spain" Journal of Political Ideologies, 21(2).

At the same time, populism might contribute to stabilising the economy through neo-developmentalist policies and alternative economics, as seen in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. The Washington Consensus (Williamson, 2009) is replaced by the Commodities Consensus (Svampa, 2012): nationalisation, an active role played by the state, public investments, and social redistribution are essential for maintaining the government.

On the other hand, there is also a New Left perspective focused on the risks and negative effects of populism on democracy. They stress the hyper-presidential leadership style, combining Caesarism and Bonapartism (Gramsci, 1996). Case studies are based on states of exception, which include human rights violations, political persecution and violence, co-optation of social movements, and concentration of power by the presidency. This degeneration is observed in the progressive governments of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela, as well as Nicaragua as El Salvador.

New Left scholars analyse corporatism, the role of trade unions and the armed forces, and the legislative and judiciary powers versus democracy. Strategic alliances strengthen presidential power, undermine political and social opposition, and diminish checks and balances systems.

In this regard, populism may also be considered a degenerative form of democracy, as it can lead to authoritarianism. The recent events in the Venezuelan presidential elections (July 28th, 2024) confirm doubts about the possible degeneration and hollowing out of democracy: minimal principles of free elections are not fully respected, suspicions of fraud, hyper-presidentialism, lack of balance of powers, military repression and social control, new elite groups, and the impotence of international observers and the international community in

general may determine the end of the honeymoon between the New Left and the Bolivarian regime[5].

c. The Alternative Right Perspective

The Alternative Right perspective on populism emphasises the positive effects on democracy and the market, focusing on the new ideological and leadership style: it is seen as the cure to restore the free market and reestablish acceptable standards of limited democracy (Hayek, 1960, 1981; Guzman, 1962, 1979, 1979a, 1982).

The Alternative Right may combine traditionalism and modernity, secular and Christian values, conservatism and libertarianism. Its discourse arises from the necessity of reestablishing democracy and values against both internal and external threats in a world dominated by 'Marxist' forces.

There is, indeed, an internal enemy and anti-communism rhetoric, which directly recalls Cold War discourse and practice, notwithstanding the unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990) gave way to an emerging multipolar world.

Moreover, the Alternative Right does not entirely exclude or condemn authoritarian methods, combining them within democracy; in fact, authoritarianism is legitimised as a necessary evil to destroy Marxism and Neo-Marxism (the "Marxist cancer," as General Pinochet's regime proudly declared after the September 11th, 1973, coup).

For this reason, the Alternative Right may conduct a 'legitimate' campaign with civilisation crusade tones against trade

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[5] The New Left perspectives are still debating whether Maduro's government maintains the minimal standards of democracy. According to their different viewpoints, they express varying stances regarding the July 28th, 2024 elections.

unions, human rights associations, the international left, and more recently, against the LGBTIQ+ community, migrants, and religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

The Alternative Right concentrates its efforts on fighting and minimising state power and its budget. The new generation of populist leaders inherited a dislike for the state, considered the main enemy, drawing from the idealism and practices of von Hayek, von Mises, and the Austrian school.

The difference between New Left populism and the Alternative Right lies in their relationship with the state: the latter demonises the state, while the New Left idealises it.

To better understand the rise of the Alternative Right in Latin America, it is crucial to study the origins of Illiberal Liberalism in Chile, particularly the political transition from an authoritarian regime toward a limited democracy: authoritarianism and neoliberalism in the post-Pinochet era, and the impact of the political thought of Friedrich von Hayek and Jaime Guzmán, the ideologue of the 1980 neoliberal and authoritarian constitution.

There is a thin line connecting Pinochet's regime and the emergence of Alternative Right leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei. These links are evident in the Chilean Constitution of 1980 and the neoliberal transformation carried out during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) under the influence of the philosophical and economic theories of Friedrich von Hayek and the ultra-conservative and authoritarian constitutionalist Jaime Guzmán.

This 1980 constitutional text contributed to creating the institutional architecture and ideological superstructure that accompanied the broad program of radical reforms dismantling the Welfare State in Chile. The Pinochet regime had previously privatised the main economic sectors and imposed – for the first time in the world – the creation of private pension and

social security systems, known as *Administradoras de Fondos de Pensiones* (AFP).

Under the so-called *shock economy* (Klein, 2004) and with the contribution of the Chicago Boys, Milton Friedman and Friederich von Hayek, Chile became a laboratory for the neoliberal reforms, not only in Latin America but globally. It inspired some of the strategies implemented by Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. during the '80s, as well as the privatisation policies applied in the ex-Soviet countries, Eastern Europe during the post-communist transition, and more recently in Western Europe, Asia, MENA, Africa and the rest of Latin America.

In Chile, the "democratic transition" led by the governments of the *Concertación por la Democracia* (a centre-left coalition that ruled the country uninterruptedly until 2010), never questioned the economic and social model, while maintaining the main principle of the Neoliberal transition. The idea of a minimal state persisted, reflecting the Hayekian philosophy and radical conservatism of Jaime Guzmán: liberty and authoritarianism coexisted in the post-Pinochet regime. The battle of ideas established neoliberalism as a hegemonic project at a global level, even among centre-left parties that ended up internalizing and reproducing the model.

In recent times, paleo-libertarianism and anarcho-capitalism have revalidated the thesis of the minimal state and liberty, reconciling it with authoritarian practices. In this regard, Alternative Right populism may be seen as a possible vehicle for the return of democracy against socialism and LGBTQI+ totalitarianism, the price to be paid for reestablishing democracy.

5. *Contemporary Populism in Latin America*

It is extremely hard to briefly analyse each populist government that has emerged in Latin America in the last few decades. However, this table contributes to understanding populism as a constant phenomenon in recent Latin American history. At the same time, it allows for the illustration of different categories and styles of populist mandates:

Country	Presidency	Political wing	Years
Peru	Alberto Fujimori	Right-wing	1990-2000
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez	Left-wing	1999-2012
Colombia	Alvaro Uribe	Right-wing	2002-2010
Mexico	Vicente Fox	Right-wing	2000-2006
Brazil	Lula Inácio da Silva	Left-wing	2002-2011
Argentina	Nestor Kirchner	Left-wing	2003-2007
Ecuador	Rafael Correa	Left-wing	2005-2015
Bolivia	Evo Morales	Left-wing	2006-2019
Peru	Alan García	Right-wing	2006-2011
Honduras	Manuel Zelaya	Left-wing	2006-2009
Argentina	Kristina Fernandez	Left-wing	2007-2015
Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	Left-wing	2008-2012
Brazil	Dilma Rousseff	Left-wing	2011-2016
Mexico	Enrique Peña Nieto	Right-wing	2012-2018
Mexico	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Left-wing	2018-2024
Brazil	Jahir Bolsonaro	Right-wing	2019-2023
El Salvador	Nayib Bukele	Right-wing	2019-

Bolivia	Luís Arce	Left-wing	2020-
Peru	Pedro Castillo	Left-wing	2021-2022
Peru	Dina Boluarte	Right-wing	2022-
Colombia	Gustavo Petro	Left-wing	2022-
Honduras	Xiomara Castro	Left-wing	2022-
Brazil	Lula Inácio da Silva	Left-wing	2023-
Argentina	Javier Milei	Right-wing	2023-
Ecuador	Daniel Noboa	Right-wing	2023-
Mexico	Claudia Scheinbaum	Left-wing	2025-

To summarise and simplify, we identify four typologies of contemporary populist regimes that have emerged over the last three decades:

a) Far Right populism in a New Cold-War language (1990-2010).
b) Left-wing populism: Socialism of the 21st Century (1998-2013).
c) Alternative Right or Right Wing 2.0 (2019-?).
d) New progressive governments wave in Latin America (2019-?).

a. Far Right Populism in a New Cold-War Language

This category includes the governments of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Alan García (2006-2011), and Vicente Fox (2000-2006). These governments emerged between the 1990s and the early 21st century in Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. Why should these be classified as populist governments? The debate centres on their political discourse and policies, considering the national context.

These governments are mainly products of political polarisation, with an ideological offensive conducted by political insurgencies. During the 1990s and early 21st century, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru faced an incipient risk of political destabilisation that could lead to a failed state. State weakness was challenged by political dissidents and crime agencies (e.g., guerrillas, drug cartels, and transnational mafias), legitimising a political discourse based on anti-communism rhetoric. This rhetoric openly recalls Cold-War discourse and strategy, even as the global world has entered a new multipolar phase.

In these contexts, Far Right populist leaders emerged. State weakness necessitated the presence of a strong leader, a one-man solution with a messianic character. The leader is an outsider of the establishment, who creates legitimacy against corrupt political classes incapable of providing concrete solutions. Similar to the Socialism of the 21st Century, Far Right populist leaders legitimized hyper-presidentialism due to internal threats.

These governments implemented counter-insurgent policies, mainly against guerrillas and armed groups. Their priorities were the restoration of democracy and institutional integrity against insurgent control. Military doctrines reinforced the armed forces, with an active role against the internal enemy. Security and intelligence measures extended their operations through social control, including human rights violations, militarisation, and state of exception. Political and military policies were accompanied by (neo)liberal policies on the social and economic fronts, juxtaposing political and social opposition as extensions of insurgent groups. These regimes combined internal and external enemy doctrines, legitimising a Cold War 2.0 discourse and practice.

In international relations, these governments legitimised U.S. hegemony on both hemispheric and global agendas. They

prioritised defence and economic cooperation policies. Security and defence cooperation agreements were products of hemispheric strategies on the "War on Drugs" and, consequently, the "War on Terrorism." On the commercial agenda, Far Right populist governments opted for Free Trade Agreements with the U.S., E.U., Pacific Alliance, and A.L.C.A. (Free Trade Area of the Americas).

b. Left-Wing Populism: Socialism of the 21st Century

We refer to the left-wing populist governments that surged in Latin America in the early 21st century. From the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998), Latin America seemed to turn left. After Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, Chile and Uruguay also turned to left-wing governments. The rise and fall of left-wing populism are inspired by the umbrella of the Socialism of the 21st Century (Dieterich, 2003).

Left-wing populists emerged as a credible alternative by delegitimising the effects of neoliberal policies. Since the *Caracazo* in 1989, social outbreaks spread throughout Latin American countries. The Water War, the Gas War, and further indigenous and peasant mobilizations in Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as social upheavals in Argentina, Chile, and Colombia, are notable examples. Social protests surged as poverty and unemployment rates increased, along with devaluation and interest rates, and the expansion of inequality.

These factors are among the main causes of the offensive against neoliberal governments. Indeed, there are structural, regional, and conjunctural causes that might have led to the rise of left-wing populist regimes. During these social outbreaks, new political leadership appeared against the "*larga noche neoliberal*," capitalising on the malaise of the *status quo* and

the need for urgent measures to overcome economic and social crises. In most cases, the new leaders took advantage of political crises, corruption scandals, polarisation, and the inadequacy of the political system to find solutions to political and economic crises, capitalising on the impending collapse by providing their own agenda.

Therefore, populist leaders emerged as the One-man Solution, a messianic power who rises from the crisis and may provide solutions to it. Following the election of populist governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the refoundation of the nation-state gave rise to constituent power, leading to the drafting of new constitutions to consolidate democratic institutions and expand the transcendence of the popular mandate[6]. For this reason, during the first period of the left-wing populism, we had the expansion and radicalisation of democracy. While populist literature also focuses on electoral processes, we may mention the high peaks in voter turnout[7].

Alongside democratising processes, left-wing populism has also provided social inclusion, with a new generation of social and economic rights within a welfare state promoted by state

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[6] From its first few months in power (1998-2013), Hugo Chávez expressed the necessity of opening a new constituent process to reform and radicalize Venezuelan democracy, establishing the Fifth Republic. Both Bolivian president Evo Morales (2005-2019) and Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa (2005-2015) called for a plurinational state, recognizing the rights of indigenous, Afro, and peasant communities, as well as the Rights of Nature and ancestral values like *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña* (Buen Vivir). They also implemented a complex system of e-voting within a checks and balances democracy.

[7] Bolivian presidential election reached the 84,5% of the voter turnout in 2005, 94,54% in 2009, 87,89% in 2014. Ecuadorean presidential election reached 76,01% of the voter turnout in 2006, 75,03% in 2009, 81,09% in 2013. Venezuelan presidential election reached 74,69% of the voter turnout in 2006, 80,20% in 2012, 79,65% in 2013.

interventionism. Consequently, middle classes emerged, and at the same time, the lower classes (working class and the most vulnerable citizens) were actively supported by broad redistributive policies.

The leaders established a new relationship with social movements, entering a loyalty dimension that favoured the logic of *divide et impera.* This approach was also used within the social bases that composed their electorate, often degenerating into "witch hunts" within the social movements through co-option and criminalisation of internal dissidents.

Finally, in foreign policy, populist left-wing leaders emerged with a new discourse on national sovereignty, mixing anti-imperialism, anti-capitalist, and anti-neoliberal rhetoric with a new Latin Americanist integration agenda. This agenda combined anti-U.S. rhetoric, anti-imperialism, anti-WTO, anti-IMF, anti-Free Trade Agreements, and anti-NATO policies, and the creation of an alternative regional/global order. However, deep contradictions also emerged from this perspective.

Their hegemony in Latin America corresponded with the Commodities Consensus (Svampa, 2012) boom and alongside the 2008's global crisis. In fact, the end of neoliberal progressivism (Fraser, 2017) also highlighted some unfavourable aspects, contradictions, and tensions. In some cases, from the beginning, these governments showed incompatible contradictions between checks and balances and hyper-presidentialism[8]. Messianism led to Caesarism, hyper-presidentialism, and authoritarianism. Economic growth and redistribution, in most

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[8] There is a strict connection between left-wing populism and hyper-presidentialism over the last two decades. Hyper-presidentialism is considered a degenerative element of Latin American left-wing populism, as it exacerbates the dominating power of the presidency over legislative and judiciary powers (Svampa, 2012).

cases, were not sustainable or long-lasting. Consequently, poverty and inequalities were not structurally defeated. By the contrary, they were condemned to return cyclically, towards middle and lower classes.

In this sense, the left-wing regimes failed to provide a long-term alternative to neoliberal hegemony. Gradually, neoliberalism was reestablished by other means: crises arose in Latin America, poverty, inequality, and unemployment rates returned, and public and private debts became prominent features of the crises (Gudynas, 2012). The peak of these crises was marked by hyperinflation, devaluation, coupled with corruption scandals.

c. Alternative Right (or Right Wing 2.0): Does It Have Anything in Common with Populism?

The Alternative Right appeared in Latin America with Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) in Brazil, the leadership of Nayib Bukele (2019-?) in El Salvador, the rise of Daniel Noboa (2023-2025) in Ecuador, and most recently, the election of Javier Milei (2023-2027) in Argentina. They are products of the reaction against the left-wing model, but also of structural crises, impasses, and violence.

With the decline of the New Left populist wave (2013-2018), the Alternative Right has emerged as a credible alternative, while left-wing parties and movements are now losing the battle of ideas (Stefanoni, 2022). Indeed, the left-wing has failed to provide an alternative agenda, unable to renew its political and economic proposals for the working class and popular sectors, both in the rural and urban sectors.

The left-wing is indeed incapable of "reading" social problems and generating long-term solutions in social crisis scenarios. This highlights the progressive governments' limitations

and defects, as they are unable to implement even their minimal agenda. The left-wing's incapacity to communicate and successfully lead their reform plans further exacerbates this issue.

How did they lose hegemony? In the new battle of ideas, the Alternative Right seemed to interpret Gramsci's contributions on cultural hegemony more accurately (Stefanoni, 2022). To achieve this, the Alternative Right has promoted active social media activism, alternating between fake news and manipulation. The online radicalization and "*followers* democracy" contributed to an anti-establishment rhetoric and activism, establishing a new political language and tools.

Returning to Gramsci, the Latin American left-wing seems to have lost cultural hegemony. The Alternative Right has successfully defied left-wing hegemony by using social media and algorithms. They have also created a new political discourse and communicative language, while the left-wing has not structurally varied.

During the contemporary cultural "wars," the New Left is politically correct and conservative, seeking to maintain and preserve its status and comfort. In contrast, the Alternative Right is politically incorrect, disruptive, and heterodox: the right wing is punk, and the left-wing is puritan (Dudda, 2019, p. 13).

Their agenda promotes an unconventional discourse. Anti-feminism activism, known as the manosphere, has radicalized to include androphilia and *sexode* (Yiannopoulos and Donovan). On social media, they also favour anti-environmental activism and a discourse against the academic establishment, which they see as dominated by socialism.

The Alternative Right has managed to balance the wave of progressive governments by creating a new elite coalition. This has been achieved through a careful political and media

strategy, restoring power through legitimacy and communication tools. This contributed to the erosion of progressive consensus by positioning an anti-establishment right and anti-globalism conservative and reactionary rebellion.

The theoretical and philosophical roots of the Alternative Right can be found in anti-liberal liberalism, ultra-libertarianism, anarcho-capitalism, and paleo-libertarianism. By embracing these positions, the Alternative Right is revolutionary, while the left-wing is moderate: the right is punk, and the left is puritan (Dudda, 2019, p. 13).

In the Latin American context, the Alternative Right has its own specificity, given the long tradition of coups d'état and authoritarianism. Its leaders are staunch defenders of military regimes and dictatorships. Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei actively promote political revisionism (Brazil, Argentina), reevaluating the role of the armed forces and military regimes against socialism.

They also promote a nostalgic campaign for military regimes, apologizing for their mandates despite all their human rights violations. They also weakened human rights associations and often humiliated the families of the desaparecidos by justifying the dictatorship's violence.

In effect, the Alternative Right openly defended the tradition of Latin American military and legislative coups, which never ended: Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012), Brazil (2016), Bolivia (2019), and Peru (2022). The far right in Venezuela and Colombia may justify political sedition and interventionism to "reestablish" democracy.

In foreign policy, these governments maintained a controversial and bipolar direction. Free-market and "democratic" values gave way to protectionism and support for dictatorship and authoritarian regimes. While U.S. hegemony is not a given, there is an ideological convergence bloc, the emergence of an

international reactionary movement and solidarity with Western, Eastern European, and U.S. counterparts.

d. New Progressive Governments Wave in Latin America: New Left 2.0, Does It Fit the Populist Label?

Finally, we introduce a new wave of centre-left governments that have emerged since 2018. Is populism an analytical category relevant to the governments of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Gustavo Petro, Luis Arce, and Xiomara Castro? We emphasise the differences between the first generation of progressive governments and the new wave of progressive governments.

In these cases, the charisma of the leader is balanced by the objective limits of their powers. First, narrow majorities and a belligerent opposition may produce an impasse and ungovernability, limiting their governance and social agenda.

Political and social polarisation tends towards confrontation, with coup threats and civil war invoked daily. The confrontation penetrates every political sphere, while power conflicts with the legislative, judiciary, and media lead to an attrition war that limits governance.

These governments also promoted redistributive policies and reformism with a social justice mandate; however, the global and regional context has entered a new crisis. Consequently, they are not completely able to implement their social reform plans.

They are not entirely populist, but they may use some populist "tools" to implement their reformist agenda, defying fierce opposition from the media, legislative, and judiciary powers. To consolidate their electoral consensus through a redistributive agenda, they tried to replicate the pattern of the Socialism of the 21st Century. However, the global context has

substantially changed, contributing to a loss of autonomy, and the heterogeneity of their coalitions does not support the minimal implementation of reforms.

Comparing the Socialism of the 21st Century and the new wave of progressivism, the latter is much more moderate and less disruptive. Paradoxically, the left-wing governments that have come to power in Latin America are much more orthodox in adhering to International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies and recommendations.

The cases of Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil confirm this trend, as do Mexico, Honduras and Chile. They are much more in defence of the status quo; they have lost the disruptive power that, in many cases, gave rise to their governments and strengthened their consensus.

In contrast, the Alternative Right is irreverent, post-modern, and relativist (Stefanoni, 2022), while the left-wing has become conformist, retrograde, nostalgic, conservative, polite, and moralistic.

In foreign policy, these governments promoted a non-alignment and alternative agenda in international relations by fostering a new regional bloc against the extreme right and reestablishing Latin American political integration. Human rights, environment, peace and democracy are key parts of their foreign policy.

The human rights and democracy clause of their foreign policy is controversial, as it is used instrumentally to promote their external agenda. These governments try to impose an alternative international agenda, distancing themselves from Nicaragua and Venezuelan "left-wing and revolutionary" governments. They seek a new political path by distancing themselves from Nicaragua and Venezuela, but this also provokes internal clashes with *vetero*-communist forces. The New Left is nowadays split in factions, between different positions such as

the São Paulo Forum, and the Puebla Group, the Claudia Sheinbaum-Lula-Petro bloc, and Boric's third way within the Latin American centre-left.

6. *Conclusions*

In this article, we focused on the structural causes and different perspectives of populism, considering it as an evolving concept. We created a theoretical and analytical framework that allowed us to establish differences and analogies with the "classic" populist definition. These analytical tools may contribute to new focuses on populist studies in Latin American studies by including contemporary debates on populism and emphasising its new features. We found that populism may converge with authoritarianism and fascism, so its boundaries are not previously and fully established.

We explored the structural causes of populism, comparing the "classic" populism of the mid-20th century to the new populist waves. During the 1930s-1950s, Latin American economies were growing, as were the 21st-century populist regimes. Populist regimes may have contributed to political and economic stabilisation. However, the 21st-century populist regimes tried to reestablish the economy and democracy.

We also focused on the democratic *malaise*, inherited disenchantment, and frustration with democratisation processes along with social and economic deterioration. Political, social, and economic crises in Latin America in the 1980s, 1990s, 2010s, and 2020s are the main interpretative keys that give rise to populist governments, both left-wing and right-wing. Populism might take advantage of electoral volatility and political polarization, providing a certain scale of stability through messianism and the extraordinary skills of the leader.

In the fourth part of this chapter, we analysed the four typologies of the contemporary populist waves in Latin American countries. We identified some analogies and differences, providing interpretative elements that may help distinguish each one. The non-dogmatic approach allowed us to analyse each one, considering the strengths and weaknesses of each typology, as well as controversial elements and contradictions.

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The Sublime Arc of Caesarism: Caesar, Shakespeare, and Radical Politics

ALEXANDER REID ROSS[1]

Abstract. This essay uses the controversy surrounding the 2017 staging of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar at Shakespeare in the Park as a launching point to explore the legacy of Caesarism as a political concept that attempts to reconcile popular sovereignty and dictatorship through the self-identity of ruler and the identity of the ruled. Drawing on descriptions of the importance of the name and signifier of Caesar from Lucan, Lefort, Laclau, and Lyotard, it develops a discourse analysis of the Caesarist phenomenon within the context of the 20th Century explications by Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci. This assessment of the "ideal name" and "floating signifier" of Caesarism and Bonapartism, as they pertain to popular sovereignty and the politics of subjectivity, is assessed in light of the Kantian idea of the sublime and a spectral existence of sovereignty. A subsequent definition is provided of Caesarism addressing the subject-oriented politics of personalized, mythically-rooted and symbolic authority.

Keywords: Caesar; Shakespeare; populism; history; Trump

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Introduction

On Friday, June 17, 2017, a protest erupted during a production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at Delacorte Theater in Central Park, New York City. The play's gruesome murder scene brought great controversy, since the man on stage who faced assassination did not look like a laurel-crowned Roman statesman, he looked a lot like Donald Trump. Though not uncommon, the comparison between then-President Donald Trump and Julius Caesar brought harangues from protesters and divestment by donors. People could countenance Trump as Caesar – indeed, some of his supporters even invited it – but the culmination of the Caesar narrative, his eventual assassination, made the analogy more real, leading to shock, terror, and protest.

The analogy between Trump and Caesar has an interesting place in the intellectual history of Western social sciences, stemming from the search for meaning amid the rise of authoritarian populist regimes throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. Between 2020 and 2024, years after the controversy at Shakespeare in the Park, networks within the US far right began to develop notions of Trump as a "Red Caesar," described by right-wing professor David Slack as "a leader whose post-Constitutional rule will restore the strength of his people" (Wilson, 2023). From the Claremont Institute to the secretive Society for American Renewal, concepts of the "Red Caesar" range from "a natural, realism-based system, under which a civilization can flourish" to a "form of one-man rule: halfway … between monarchy and tyranny" (Wilson, 2023). By mid-June 2024, the *Financial Times* broached the story, declaring that a "well-organised cabal of rightwing intellectuals is assembling an authoritarian playbook for Donald Trump" (Luce, 2024).

That contemporary scholars' comparisons of Trump to Caesar may evoke contempt or agreement does not concern the present study. The important thing is the comparison, itself, how it coincides with previous iterations of the analogy, and the meaning that it produces today in terms of populism and the far right. Lastly, the concept of Trump as Caesar interests the present piece in light of the political concept of the name and the self-identity between ruler and ruled.

1. *The Show*

In his breezy curtain speech before the opening night performance of Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* on June 13, 2017, Artistic Director at the Public Theater in New York City, Professor Oskar Eustis of New York University, assured the audience, "neither Shakespeare nor the Public Theater could possibly advocate violence as a solution to political problems, and certainly not assassination" (ABC News, 2017). It was an apparently awkward concession to make, since performances of Julius Caesar do not typically bring with them the gravity of authentic reproducibility. However, in this case, the staging's analogy could not have been clearer.

As the entertainment newsmagazine Inside Edition narrated over video of the climactic scene, "It's an actor dressed to look just like President Donald Trump as he's assassinated on stage… And there's no mistaking the Trump connection. Check out the unbuttoned overcoat and red tie that hangs over his waist" (Inside Edition, 2017).

To make things worse, beside Gregg Henry, the actor playing Trump, with his red hair quaffed in a pompadour, Caesar's wife Calphurnia looked like Melania Trump. People began to refer to the show jocularly as Trumpius Caesar (Stewart, 2017).

Despite Eustis's curtain disclaimer, the right-wing media immediately began to whip up outrage over the horror of the site of their beloved leader massacred on a Manhattan stage. And the whole ecosystem of social media reaction and news hysteria was primed for the event. Just two weeks prior to the opening night, comedian Kathy Griffin posed for a photo while holding a likeness of the decapitated head of Donald Trump. Amid the immediate backlash, CNN fired her from her role as popular commentator, USA Today asked "Did Kathy Griffin break the law with her photo of a decapitated Trump?" (Cummings, 2017) and she produced a video publicly apologizing for the stunt (Park, 2017).

And on the day of Caesar's opening night, a shooter named James Hodgkinson armed with an SKS semi-automatic rifle opened fire on a Republican Party Congressional baseball game practice session in the DC suburb of Alexandria, Virginia. The attack turned into a ten-minute shootout with police, in which six people faced injuries, four of them were shot, and the shooter was killed. Although a supporter of universal health care and Bernie Sanders's democratic socialist movement, Hodgkinson had been charged with assaulting his own foster daughter. A few weeks before the shooting, he wrote, "Trump is a Traitor. Trump Has Destroyed Our Democracy. It's Time to Destroy Trump & Co" (Pagliery, 2017). It was a real bloodbath to coincide with the one on center stage in Central Park.

In the aftermath of the Griffin beheading and the Congressional baseball game shooting, the staging of Julius Caesar seemed all the more fraught. Within days of opening night, word of protest began to spread. Delta Air Lines rescinded their commercial sponsorship of the Public Theater, declaring that the play had "crossed the line on the standards of good taste," and that it did "not reflect Delta Air Lines' values" (Delta

[@Delta], 2017). Another sponsor, Bank of America, pulled out, insisting that the company did not know the play "was intended to provoke and offend" (Konerman, 2017).

Writing in a syndicated column, Canadian columnist Nigel Hannaford declared it "time to dial back Trump Derangement Syndrome," listing the theatrical reproduction alongside the Kathy Griffin beheading and baseball practice shooting as feats of liberal obsession with hatred of Trump (Hannaford, 2017). Another Canadian commenter rattled off more incidents, including rapper Snoop Dogg "shooting a clown dressed as President Trump in the head," and Stephen Colbert showing an image of a Trump aid with a severed head impaled on a spike (Bozell and Graham, 2017).

On June 17, a small protest gathered outside of the Delacorte theater. Coincidentally, it was exactly one year after a 19 year-old British man attempted to take the pistol from a police officer in a Las Vegas theater with the intention of assassinating Trump. The play went forward as planned, and just as the climactic moment took place, two protesters jumped up from their seats and began charging toward the stage.

"Stop the normalization of political violence against the right!" one 24 year-old woman shouted. "This is unacceptable." As security approached her, she began shouting "Nazis!" and then, turning toward the aghast crowd, she began to accuse the audience of acting like Joseph Goebbels. As security escorted her out, she left the audience with a final word of defiance: "Shame on Kathy Griffin, and shame on all of you for promoting political violence against Donald Trump" (Palmer and Salam, 2017).

Casting Trump as Caesar was always a gamble. One never knows what will happen before the final curtain, and in this case, the experiment rested on what the audience will think of both historical analogy, in general, and this particular analogy

between Trump and Caesar. A few years prior, a theater in Minneapolis placed Barack Obama in the position of Caesar, so the kind of positioning was not new or unique (Cooper, 2017). At the same time, the theater often stands out as a kind of social critique – to "hold a mirror up to nature," (Shakespeare, 1623) in Shakespeare's terms – so the association of Obama with Caesar could easily come off as self-criticism. Trump represented a different political phenomenon that fits in with two centuries of incisive commentary about Caesarism and populism in the West. So what does it mean to compare Trump to Shakespeare's Caesar in light of two hundred years of commentary on the nature of Caesarism in the modern world?

2. *Original Caesarism*

Shakespeare understood Caesar through various sources, and the general assumption that his Caesar derives largely from Plutarch is likely false. Shakespeare's Caesar is nothing if not complicated and contradictory; his death is hardly a celebratory scene in the play, but it also lacks moral clarity. Caesar and his death represented real problems in Shakespeare's world of Renaissance England – issues of tyranny, mob violence, and burgeoning republican sentiment – and there is no way of approaching the staging of Julius Caesar in New York in 2017 without acknowledging this.

I would argue that the Social War between the forces of Marius, on the side of the *populari*, and Sulla, on the side of the optimates, found a kind of rough synthesis in the figure of Caesar, who ultimately combined the dictatorship of Sulla with the popular appeal of Marius. Caesar destroys the Republic but seems to revive Rome by emphasizing military prestige and bestowing lavish favors and concessions to allies and lower classes.

Renaissance authors understood this history from different perspectives with contradictory opinions, in part based on the Roman sources that were available. Plutarch presented a Caesar who is a complicated character, by no means worthy of fulsome praise. Suetonius similarly combines a portrait of a power-hungry schemer with an assiduous and sober magistrate. Appian provides a wholly laudatory retelling of Caesar's role in the civil war. Lucan, on the other hand, reviles Caesar. Along with some of these sources, Shakespeare also probably relied on Orlando Pescetti's 1594 play, *Il Cesare*, which favors Brutus. Reflected in the multiplicity of perspectives on this historical story is the fact that Shakespeare's Caesar seems to fit none or all of them (Schanzer, 2013).

Schanzer writes that Shakespeare's portrayal of Caesar contains an incredibly complex array of characteristics viewed from different positions, ultimately asking if "there is no real Caesar, that he merely exists as a set of images in other men's minds and his own?" (Schanzer, 2013). Caesar becomes little more than a name, a complex of features, images, ranging from weak to strong, intelligent to foolish, material to sublime. Caesar reflects more the identity of the subject than an individual personality. It is especially the last thing I want to consider the most – what is sublime in Caesar between his identity and the subject – because I think it is there that we find the durability of his sovereignty.

It is interesting to consider Immanuel Kant's Third Critique on judgement in this context, because it is entirely devoted to exploring the depths and extent of the borders of humanity, nature, and reason that lie within the notion of sovereignty. For Kant's aesthetics, the sublime is precisely what exists outside of these borders, outside of our rational minds; and when it is introduced to our minds, the sublime has a terrifying, almost shattering effect (Kant, 2008). In Kant's world, nature is

sublime; lightning and thunder are sublime. Kant claims women love beauty while men love the sublime, which if elucidated would indicate that he believes women are sublime and men are beautiful. Sovereignty must remain sublime – what is beast in man and man in beast (Kant and Guyer, 2011).

If we assess Caesar in both the Roman histories and Shakespearian adaptation on the Renaissance stage, we find a kind of duality – the normal and the sublime. In Shakespeare, Caesar calls himself "constant as the Northern Star," and is associated with supernatural forces (Shakespeare, 1599). I should also note here feminist readings of Shakespeare's Caesar that consider his less masculine attributes in terms of his wounds and vulnerability (see for example the work of Coppélia Kahn). Caesar's body is weak and failing; he makes mistakes; he is afraid (Kahn, 2013).

In Lucan, Caesar is compared to the wolf, to thunder and lightning; he flashes and flies in storms of violence and unleashes torrents of blood. Yet Lucan also writes that Caesar appropriated "the empty name of authority" in order to pursue personal aims (Lucan, 1909).

We should not ignore the concept by the Roman poet of "the empty name." If we investigate the original Latin, we find the words, "*nomen inane imperii,*" "the empty name of the imperium." "Inane" here can be alternately operationalized as vain, futile, or insignificant. Lucan follows by saying that Caesar, "stamped the sad times with a worthy mark" (Lucan, 1909).

So we have Caesar's conquests marked by the symbols and signifiers of military authority, and to them is fixed this empty name of *imperii*, the vanity of empire, which Caesar assumes. And when reflecting on this empty name of imperii, we must recall not only Caesar's identity but Caesar's existence precisely as an identity interpolated by the subjects who encounter and view him in Shakespeare.

For imperialists, Lucan's statement is impossible to imagine. The Italian Traditionalist Giulio Evola would write that "the old Roman notion of imperium referred to the pure power of command, the quasi-mystical force of *auctoritas*" (Evola, 2002). For Evola, this authority required spiritual fervor at all times, or it would disintegrate into an empty mechanism. This spiritual fervor of Empire is its sublime quality, its irrational core for which the identity of Caesar stands.

Yet with Lucan we see this occult spiritual power as completely empty at the same time – it is a sublime, destructive force that loses energy and speed, ultimately becoming self-destructive. For Lucan, the Caesar principle fills in and blocks what key thinker of populism Ernesto Laclau calls the "empty signifier," an object that gains meaning only in relation to the desire of the subject (Laclau, 1996). The historical significance here is that, emerging after the Social War, Caesarism attempts to replace the empty signifier of the "people" as sovereign with that of Caesar, as sovereign. This process of filling the empty signifier of the "people" – debasing popular sovereignty – with personalized power is one of desublimation through which meaning – and the way it is derived – is fixed by the sovereign.

In Shakespeare, the audience is constantly reminded that Caesar is a mere mortal, which makes his power all the more difficult to comprehend. Casius complains that Caesar's authority derives not from his own sublime dominance but from the people's stupidity. "And why should Caesar be a tyrant, then?" Casius asks:

> Poor man, I know he would not be a wolf
> But that he sees the Romans are but sheep;
> He were no lion, were not Romans hinds.
> Those that with haste will make a mighty fire
> Begin it with weak straws. What trash is Rome,
> What rubbish, and what offal when it serves

For the base matter to illuminate
So vile a thing as Caesar! (Shakespeare, 1599)

Once his figure is clarified, Caesar is not wolf but man, yet the Roman crowds follow him. And here we have an epic contradiction in Cassius's character: he is the most Machiavellian of the republicans, less of an idealist and more practical in thought. He seeks liberty for the people, yet he hates them at the same time. Caesar is more beloved, yet he craves more power, which he can only find in death.

This is what I'm calling the "sublime arc of popular sovereignty," the mix between beast and sovereign, the combination of mortal and sublime in everyone. The way that Caesar comes to power on a wave of sublime force associated with the populist side of the social war, and the way that this irrational movement opens up the empty name of authority, which is overdetermined by his identity as a substitute for popular sovereignty. Caesar's death, however, unleashes chaos and returns as a spirit of sovereignty betrayed. In Shakespeare, it is the time of "fell deeds" smelling "above the earth," of Caesar's ghost plaguing his assassins, of "dogs of war" and of haunting suicides. The death of Caesar unleashes the sublime and renders Caesar to the spirit.

3. *Caesarism and Populism in the 19th Century*

It was not until the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte that the term Caesarism emerged within the lexicon of European political discourse (published already in 1816 by Paul-Louis Courier), and in many ways it can be used synonymously with Bonapartism (Antonini, 2020). Whether written in favor or opposed to Napoleon's regime, Caesarism immediately indicated a tendency of European dictatorship that often emerged during a

crisis but did not involve hereditary rule. Caesarism ruled through a dictatorship of popular sovereignty, a paradoxical twist on the republican tradition that attempted to balance both left and right-wing aspects.

The comparisons between Caesar and Napoleon were invited by Napoleon, to some degree. However, they remain complicated. Calling himself a "republican emperor" and minting coins of his face crowned with laurels, Napoleon embraced the trappings of dictatorial sovereignty, and his military successes drew comparisons to the Roman conqueror. Napoleon refused to be called Caesar, because he believed the name had been tarnished by the Holy Roman Empire, not because he rejected the comparison. In his book about Caesar, Napoleon argued for Caesar's legitimacy based on "necessary and protective" rule that "was the result of the opinion and the will of the people" (Prutsch, 2020).

The leading critics of Caesarism (or what soon came to be called Bonapartism) during the Bourbon Restoration were liberals like the pluralist Benjamin Constant and the doctrinaire François Guizot. Constitutional monarchists, Constant and Guizot helped formulate an alternative to the restoration of Bourbon absolutism during the July Monarchy (Prutsch, 2020). Thus, Guizot and Constant would represent the right wing of the republican cause, whereas on the radical left wing, a new Caesarism would emerge.

The military downfall of Napoleon led some Romantics to suggest that, if uninhibited, he might have ushered in far more sweeping reforms to improve the lot of rural farmers and the urban proletariat. Jean-François Lyotard notes that, after the fall of the Corsican military leader, the younger generation of Romantics conferred upon him the Ideal name – a "watchword" that takes up universal forms of the "aesthetic, ethical, and the political, not cognitive" (Lyotard, 1988). In other

words, they viewed Napoleon as a figure who represented the image of their hero – possessed of political virtue, ethical superiority, but not rational action. That is to say, a sublime identity.

Lyotard's assessment of the Ideal name can be observed in Hegel, who insisted that Napoleon does not represent but radically inhabits the spirit as it conquers the Earth in the name of Reason (Arthur, 1989; Hegel, 2018). Napoleon becomes associated with the Napoleonic Code, the law-bringer, liberator, clearing the way for the new Empire. Here, Napoleon means the order of *virtù*, and vice-versa. Bonaparte makes history, and history makes Bonaparte. With Hegel, the spirit remains sublime to all but the one who lives directly within it, conducts it, and is conducted by it. The sovereign is Ideal in so far as he understands that which exists beyond mundane knowledge, and manifests it on earth (Arthur, 1989; Hegel, 2018).

The Romantic admiration of Bonaparte and Caesar involves the belief that only these Great Men could finally force through the kind of popular reforms that the *populari* and Jacobins had sought to enact (Crossley, 2002). While critics of Caesarism argued for rational constitutional systems to keep revolution in check as they increased the economic productivity of the state, Caesarists on both left and right pushed for an authoritarian strongman, a dictatorship to pursue radical aims.

The Romantic offensive against the moderate theoretical corpus contributed to secret societies like the *Amis du peuple*, who struggled in order to implement a more democratic regime. So it is not surprising that the *Amis du peuple* – those who resisted against the Bourbon restoration and then militated against the Orléanist July Monarchy – also included circles who harbored furtive hopes about the restoration of the Bonapartist regime (Caron, 1980). From Heinrich Heine and August Blanqui to Karl Marx, we can see the development of a socialist dictatorship engaging with the Caesarist idea amid the growing

nationalist and communist movements of the 19th Century (Sammons, 2016; Prutsch, 2020).

Napoleon's nephew, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte III, emerged through such utopian socialist and subversive networks established during the Orléanist constitutional monarchy. In them, he found a conduit for his enthusiasm for state-backed industrialism and his populist flare. Taking power through a coup that he called Operation Rubicon, Louis Napoleon III immediately commandeered the legacy of Caesar. It will be Napoleon III, perhaps more than the first Bonaparte, who established the name as corollary to universal male suffrage, the plebiscite, and industrial modernism (Thody, 1989).

While the young Marx took inspiration from Blanqui's concepts of a triumvirate dictatorship to educate the proletariat into self-governance, his adoption of an ambiguous dictatorship model would not prevent him from fiercely attacking the new Bonapartist regime in France. The critique of Bonapartism is perhaps most schematically represented by Karl Marx's text on Louis Napoleon III's rise. Called the *18th Brumaire*, this document accuses Bonaparte of rallying the poorest of the poor, the lumpenproletariat, together with the aristocrats, noting that the two appear as mirror images of licentiousness and disorganization. With the poor and aristocrats, the small business owners, shopkeepers, workshop masters, skilled tradesmen, and other middle-class professionals decided to elect Louis Napoleon, because they believed he would secure the peace and order of the state better than the volatile republican system ushered in by the revolution of 1848.

Marx even borrows from Shakespeare in his depiction of the lumpenproletariat. Marx writes, "This Bonaparte, who constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat, who here alone rediscovers in mass form the interests which he personally pursues, who recognizes in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the

only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally, is the real Bonaparte" (Marx, 1999). Shakespeare's Caesar rallies the same crowds according to Cassius, who seeks to dethrone the tyrant in favor of a republican return. Cassius speaks:

> Those that with haste will make a mighty fire
> Begin it with weak straws. What trash is Rome,
> What rubbish, and what offal when it serves
> For the base matter to illuminate
> So vile a thing as Caesar!" (Shakespeare, 1599)

So it seems that Marx echoes Shakespeare's Casius remarking on the "offal" who cast their support for Caesar. I contend that this is no coincidence but an intentional echo, since Marx's next sentence describes, "performances of state as comedy in the most vulgar sense, as a masquerade in which the grand costumes, words, and postures merely serve to mask the pettiest knavery." And after citing the "Napoleonic eagle," Marx just two sentences later describes Napoleon's supporters as "play[ing] the part of the people as Nick Bottom," the oafish character from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Marx, 1999).

Here we find several sad ironies about Marx's critique of Bonapartism. Firstly, the long list of those who supported Bonaparte hardly indicate a kind of secret conspiracy; instead, it helps to explain the broad popularity of *the name of Bonaparte* among the French. This popularity inhered in Louis Napoleon's ability to move beyond the elitism of the July monarchy and the nostalgia for his uncle's unmatched glory. The second major irony there is that Marx, himself, supported not a republic but a dictatorship. The third irony, which hangs over all of this, is the fact that Shakespeare's Caesar does not adequately fit the template of the tyrannical oppressor; there is far more nuance to it.

While Marx's own "dictatorship of the proletariat" developed through engagement with Blanqui's proto-caesarism, the latter's followers ultimately supported the revanchist populist General Georges Boulanger five decades later (Hutton, 1974). Meanwhile, Blanqui's influence extended to the writings of revolutionary populist Pyotr Tkachev, and thence Sergei Nechayev. This lineage fed into the Marxist ideology of Vladimir Lenin, although the latter would have a difficult time attempting to differentiate his own strategic position from theirs, which Russian intellectuals viewed as overly Jacobin and not realistic enough. In this tradition, the isolation of Stalin as a uniquely Caesarist figure among the Bolsheviks fails to reckon with the complex revolutionary situation of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in its formative years as an evolution of the populist movement.

In the United States, one finds ramifications of this Bonapartist legacy in the populist movement that comes into full form at the end of the nineteenth century. Thomas Watson, the founder of the original populist movement in the US, the People's Party, surprisingly took up Napoleon's laurels after his own electoral failures. In his fulsome biography of Napoleon, social control and censorship, brutal repression, militarism, imperialist expansion, and even his eventual aristocratic court are glossed over in a fawning portrait of a man who represented, to the prototypical populist, the height of popular sovereignty. Watson's leading biographer concludes that the populist was "reconciled to a union of Caesarism and democracy" (Jäger, 2021).

It is, thus, not at all contradictory that when Mussolini turns toward fascism, he publishes a newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*, with the masthead featuring quotations from August Blanqui and from Napoleon (Camus and Lebourg, 2017). By the same coin, it is small wonder the Marxist Michael Parenti wrote such a

favorable biography of Caesar, calling him the "dictator of the *proletarii*" (Parenti, 2004). What the Bonapartist and Caesarist trends of the 19th Century show us is that, unfortunately, there is a profound tendency of democratizing movements to flow into a dictatorial resolution to the socio-economic problems confronting them, and Caesar becomes a prototype for this trend on the imperial level.

4. *Twentieth Century Caesarism*

All this suggests that Caesarism appears to develop through populist movements – the populari, the Jacobins, the utopian socialists of the Second Republic, and the Populists. It rises amid the sublime chaos of contentious conditions, and in seizing what Lucan called "the empty name of authority," it over-determines the sovereignty of the "people" with its Ideal name. In this regard, Caesarism is post-populist; it uses the aegis of popular sovereignty to destroy dissensus; it imposes the name of empire over that of popular sovereignty and establishes Caesar as the political subject *par excellence.*

Max Weber's theory of Caesarism posits the trend as a form of *Herrschaft*, a kind of irrational dominion based on emotional proclamations and authority. Weber's sociology of Caesarism, like his general approach to ideal types, begins with passion and the unknown and resolves in an effort to grasp it. Where power is irrational, it becomes sublime by eluding normal categories and obtains a protean, labile characteristic. Weber's assessment of Caesarism begins with invective, as he criticizes Bismarck as a Caesarist, but once he begins to understand Caesarism as plebiscitary power, he recognizes it as a form of legitimacy and subsumes it within the broader charismatic type (Baehr, 2017).

Weber declares that, as a form of Herrschaft, Caesarism involves a condition where the ruled follow the commands of the ruler "as if the ruled had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its very own sake… the command is accepted as a 'valid' norm" (Breuer, 1998). So for Weber, Caesarism involves the self-identity of the ruler and the ruled on the level of (delusional) acceptance of the sovereign's will as one's own. Caesarism becomes the *volonté générale* inverted.

Gramsci was certainly an avid reader of Weber while he developed his own theories of Caesarism and totalitarianism. For Gramsci, popular sovereignty creates a crisis of class struggle that fosters the inexorable persistence of disequilibrium. The history of class struggle is a history of disorder – disruptive, a force of disorganization – inherent within the fabric of society. The Marxian concept of sublime class struggle is restructured on the terrain of Casearism through a social peace that converges with the assignation of the "Ideal name" mentioned above. It disrupts the disruption, confronts sublime with sublime, and in overdetermining popular sovereignty, desublimates the political (Antonini, 2020).

Yet this desublimation leaves both Gramsci and Weber somewhat ambivalent about Caesarism. Ultimately, Weber's rejection of Caesarism folds into his depressing resignation to the realities of the triumph of the charismatic personality in democratic systems filled with weak individuals.

Discussing Shakespeare's *Caesar* in 1947, poet W.H. Auden was quite Weberian in noting that "it is about a society that is doomed… not by the evil passions of selfish individuals, because such passions always exist, but by an intellectual and spiritual failure of nerve that made the society incapable of coping with its situation, which is why the noble Brutus is even more at sea in the play than the unscrupulous and brutal Antony"

(Auden, 2008). For Auden, the problem is not merely that Brutus presents an indecisive cluster of feelings and ideals that ultimately collapses into treachery; it is that the smallness of Brutus's character is manifest within the Roman crowds, themselves, in turn grotesquely violent, obsequious, and vacillating.

For Gramsci, Bonapartism can be progressive or regressive, depending on whether the imposition of sovereignty takes place to restore a reactionary equilibrium or midwife a new one based on altered social conditions. Similar to the 19th Century critiques, Caesarism is also a post-populist phenomenon, a political trend imposing the semblance of unity on a political condition riven by complexity and dissensus, which takes up the name of the people, and even replaces the name of the people, in order to quell the upheavals of popular sovereignty with the identity of no identity (Antonini, 2020).

Developing that evanescent identity of Caesar even further, sociologist Claude Lefort would contend not that Bonaparte represents an Ideal name but a kind of illusion, a mirror game. "Bonapartist power appears as an imaginary product, a product of combined myths, a product of a society that can only face the problem of its unity – or better, of its identity – through the mode of illusion" (Lefort, 1986). Hence, with Lefort on Bonaparte, as with Lucan on Caesar and Weber on Caesarism, we find a kind of imperial illusion with which to impress people during hard times, and which impresses on them a feeling of self-identity with the sovereign as power and collectivity or unity.

It is that unity to which European New Right exponent Alain de Benoist is referring when, in 1994, he called for Europe to assemble into a new federated empire, backed by the slogan, "Imperial principle above, direct democracy below: this is what would renew an old tradition!" (de Benoist, 1993) He had not changed by the publication of his recent book on populism, in

which he champions the Bonapartist right for favoring "'the appeal to the people' together with anti-parliamentarism, anti-liberalism and the plebiscite tradition" (de Benoist, 2017). It is the same political tendency that led Jean-Marie Le Pen to accuse de Benoist's research group of being mired in "Sovieto-phile sub-Gaullism," and it is why the Russian political system resonates with the European New Right (Von Beyme, 2013).

As Alexandar Mihailovic writes in his new book *Illiberal Vanguard*, "Flirting with authoritarianism in the trappings of both ultramontane conservatism (monarchy) and notional leftism (the Soviet legacy), Putin and the United Russia Party have positioned themselves as agents of an autonomous and Caesarist state in which leadership is placed in the role of negotiating and adjudicating between the disparate demands of various constituencies, in a pantomime of acting on behalf of the common good" (Mihailovic, 2023).

This is also why Richard Spencer referred to Donald Trump as the "Napoleon of the current year" (Spencer, 2016) and why his former business partner Jason Jorjani, proclaimed that "We will have a Europe in 2050 where the bank notes have Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great" (Pharos, 2018). This is what constitutes the end state of so-called illiberal democracy, which is also the end state of the populist radical right: a sovereign who claims the mantle of the people, yet rules with only the appearance of a parliament, seeking to spread his political model to other states in the hopes of building a federated empire.

Thinking all this together, I will venture the following claim:

Caesarism or Bonapartism imposes a rationalized order over the persistence of class struggle that results from the sublime complexity of popular sovereignty, thus emptying the latter of its cognitive content and producing in its place the illusion of self-identity with the ruler.

5. *Back to Shakespeare in the Park*

Returning to the staging of Trump as Caesar in 2017, I want to contend with the reason for the historical analogy and its interesting parallels with past theories of Caesarism. In short, I contend that Caesarism is essentially a form of identity politics, a self-identification with the personalization of authority that brings a feeling of sublime power. In Shakespeare, we find that this power is only realized through death. When Casius attempts to bring his fellow politician Brutus into the assassination plot against Caesar, he pads his ego and, essentially, evokes his name. Cassius tells Brutus:

> 'Brutus' and 'Caesar' – what should be in that
> 'Caesar'?
> Why should that name be sounded more than
> yours?
> Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
> Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;
> Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with 'em,
> 'Brutus' will start a spirit as soon as 'Caesar.'
> (Shakespeare, 1599)

For Shakespeare, the importance of Caesar's name is shown in the return of Caesar as a ghost, which becomes far more powerful than his enfeebled, partly deaf body, suffering from the falling sickness. After his murder, Caesar's ghost presents itself to Brutus plainly as "thy evil spirit." In this way, Caesar's spirit doubles Brutus's own, returning to Cassius's doubling of their names in Act I. Note here, as well, that Cassius's comparison of the names of Caesar and Brutus involves the invocation of conjuring magic through these names. By usurping the name of Caesar, Brutus has taken not only Caesar's mantle but also his vengeful spirit. The two – the name and the spirit – are

intertwined in this way, and they are both more powerful than the man.

Committing suicide at the end of the play, Brutus invokes the name and the ghost, not the man, declaring, "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet! / Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords / In our own proper entrails." German philosopher Hermann Ulrici would write in 1846 that Shakespeare took from Plutarch the idea of a ghost appearing to Brutus as "his evil genius," and gave it the form of Caesar representing, "the offended spirit of history itself, which, in fact, not only avenges political crimes, but visits ethical transgressions with equal severity" (Ulrici, 2008).

For Ulrici, Caesar becomes the ultimate spirit of history for Shakespeare, just as Napoleon takes on the world-historical manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* for Hegel. These two figures – Caesar and Napoleon – become inextricable in their names and what they represent on the level of the spirit, both in encomium and critique. In other words, they become part of a sublime realm. J.E. Phillips even goes so far as to claim that the "ghost of Caesar" represents "that 'spirit of Caesarism,' which … is the concept of unitary sovereignty" (Phillips, 1940). The ghost indicates the sublime return of Caesarism as unitary sovereignty which forces the suicide of democratic usurpers.

This was similar the analysis of Alessandro Muccioli, who did one of three translations of Shakespeare's play in 1924, where Caesar as ghost takes primacy over Caesar as man. Giuseppe De Lorenzo's introduction to a different translation identifies both Brutus and Caesar in the figure of Mussolini. By 1928, however, Brutus was condemned in Fascist Italy by Carlo Formichi, who called Shakespeare "a fervid patriot." In 1935, a new heavily-censored run of Caesar was staged, with references to his weakness cut out and Brutus' character simplified to make him appear less conflicted. As Silvia Bigliazzi writes,

"Shakespeare's Caesar could still be a political icon [under fascism] as long as Caesar-the-man was forgotten and his spirit assumed as the tutelary deity of an Empire which was no longer to be imagined, but had become a new reality" (Bigliazzi, 2020).

In 1933, Mussolini told interviewer Emile Ludwig, "I love Caesar. He was unique in that he combined the will of the warrior with the genius of the sage. At bottom he was a philosopher who saw everything sub specie aeternitatis" (Bigliazzi, 2020). The reference to seeing the eternal reminds one both of the ghost of Caesar and the world spirit it represents – a sublime spirit Mussolini believed himself to inhabit. Yet between 1924 and 1935, the regime lost the revolutionary impulse that drew comparisons to the Caesar-Brutus twin, smoothing out Brutus's complexity, and molding Caesar into a strongman. Shakespeare had become fascistized (Bigliazzi, 2020).

Yet we must return to the essence of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* as a problem play. Is the unedited Shakespeare's Caesar moral? It is difficult to say. Was it moral to kill him for a higher ideal? Shakespeare seems to leave the question open in some ways. Drawing on Sigurd Burckhardt, Coppélia Kahn writes of the guilt of Caesar's assassins not as one of treachery so much as anachronism: "In this play, republican ideology can be adopted or coopted by any ambitious man so as to violate its basic tenets – without him or his enemies even realizing it" (Kahn, 2013).

The problem, in the end, isn't about fixed certainty but its lack: the fluidity with which the categories are rapidly dissolved, laying pride low and throwing assumptions into question. Again, the sublime prevails over all efforts to prevail over it; the spirit exacts revenge over those who rebelled against Caesar.

So what does it mean if the Central Park Caesar smooths over Caesar in the opposite way as the fascist regime? For critics at the *Financial Times*, the staging of Shakespeare's history was too on the nose, offering "a flattened sense of Julius Caesar's ambiguities; a less subtle play" (Maltby, 2017). What happens if Caesar becomes too menacing and Brutus too heroic? Perhaps it is too sublime. In the US, the democratic desire to know the unknown, the expansive will to have freedom, the drive to be reconciled to meaning, are all things that might hazard a belittling of the problem play, falling into the same problems that it presents. And this, in itself, is a form of desublimation.

As artistic director Oskar Eustis noted on opening night, the play presents "the danger of a large crowd of people, manipulated by their emotions, taken over by leaders who urge them to do things that not only are against their interests but destroy the very institutions that are there to serve and protect them" (ABC News, 2017). Here, Eustis could be speaking about Caesar taking up the crown. In imposing his personal brand over the symbols of the US, Trump overdetermines the political system with his own meaning during a period of socio-political disequilibrium. In this case the play seems more like a warning to Trump not to become Caesar.

But Eustis could just as easily be speaking about those hoping to unseat Trump through illegal methods, who would destroy those institutions of the Republic that offer their protection. His evocation of the phrase "serve and protect" immediately indicates the motto of US law enforcement, suggesting perhaps that the widespread opposition to police brutality in the US could present just as doomed a usurpation as Trump's. It is this fluidity and uncertainty underlying the staging of *Julius Caesar* that returns us to Auden's phrase, "it is about a society that is doomed… by an intellectual and spiritual failure of

nerve that made the society incapable of coping with its situation" (Auden, 2008).

6. *Conclusion*

In this sketch, I have outlined theories of Caesarism, showing that the political trend involves suppressing the sublime forces of popular sovereignty in favor of the Ideal name of political order. Caesarism represents an identity crisis in which sovereignty and spirit remain sublime in spite of efforts to establish order and embark on political desublimation – an idea of sovereignty without government. By indicating the guilt on "both sides," the staging of Caesar in Central Park cast both Trump and his detractors as two forces in radical disequilibrium engaged in struggle with no clear victor. In swooping down from above in order to restore order in such a paradigm, perhaps the real Caesar would have been the man behind the curtain, the Oz-like spinner of fantasy and marvel concealing reality in a complex of myth and mirrors.

In this regard, a connection must be drawn between discourse analysis and phenomenology, where the unknown sublimation of the subject's identity joins a spectral world of sovereignty. In Caesarism there is only the illusion of an Ideal name, an ambiguous floating signifier that links the subject to power with the objective of order and *authority*. Where these themes rejoin Trump and Trumpism, more studies should be carried out to understand the self-identity between Trump and his followers, as well as the nature and importance of his name as a signifier and ideal.

We will see what happens, but I will leave you with the words of Cassius: "Forever and forever farewell, Brutus. / If we do

meet again, we'll smile indeed; / If not, 'tis true this parting was well made" (Shakespeare, 1599).

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'Old' and 'New' Far-Right Parties in Germany and Italy: An Overview

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Abstract. This chapter examines the evolution of far-right parties in Germany and Italy, focusing on the intersection of 'old' and 'new'. Despite the transformation of traditional far-right parties and the rise of new populist radical right forces in both countries, the legacy of Fascism and Nazism remains deeply entrenched. The Italian and German far right has adapted to contemporary political and social landscapes, yet continues to rely heavily on the tenets of their fascist and Nazi predecessors.

Keywords: Far-right; Populism; Fascism; Nationalism; Immigration

Introduction[2]

In the aftermath of their defeat in 1945, both Germany and Italy were subjected to significant external and internal pressure to dismantle the legacies of Nazism and Fascism. Measures toward denazification and defascistization were undertaken in

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[2] This contribution is a short overview of my reflections at the international seminar *Populism and the Far Right*, organized by Polidemos at the Univeristà Cattolica di Milano on 24 April 2024. Due to limited space and the introductory character of this chapter, I have left out many details (e.g., minor far-right groups) and focused on the broad strokes of the analysis.

order to purge the remnants of dictatorship from political life and to facilitate the transition to democratic rule. Both countries faced the complex task of rebuilding not only their political systems but also their national identities in the shadow of their totalitarian histories. However, despite these considerable efforts, the postwar period saw the immediate re-emergence of neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups in both Italy and Germany (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 35-38; Pfahl-Traughber, 2006, p. 22).

Initially operating on the political fringes, some of these groups found ways to reorganize and expand, and their persistence has proven to be a significant challenge for the democratic systems of both countries. More specifically, while a number of them did not survive the postwar period, others have demonstrated an ability to adapt their rhetoric and strategies to shifting social and political conditions. At the same time, new far-right parties were founded and often assumed a 'hybrid' form, combining old extreme with new radical right ideas and personnel (Mudde, 2019).

Mirroring a trend also seen in other European countries, far-right parties in both Italy and Germany have thus undergone a process of 'renewal' or 'transformation'. This process has involved both a general shift in rhetoric and a more pronounced populist style, the accentuation of national sovereignty as a defense against perceived threats from globalization, immigration, and supranational institutions, and, later on, the exploitation of social insecurity arising from various crises, especially the refugee crisis and the Covid-19-Pandemic (Backes and Moureau, 2021, pp. 13-16).

Nevertheless, apart from a few exceptions (like the self-proclaimed 'anti-fascist' Lega Nord in the 1990s), German and Italian far-right parties continue to draw on various ideological tenets of Fascism and Nazism, or refuse to seriously distance themselves from them. The goal of this contribution is to

provide a concise and schematic overview of the growing intersections between major contemporary populist radical right parties and 'traditional' far-right parties in both countries.

1. *Outlining the interfaces between old and new*

Defining the 'far right' and classifying far-right parties in Germany and Italy requires determining among other things: a) the use of terminology in different languages, b) the relationship between a general definition and analytical differentiation, and c) the importance of a diachronic approach. The use of terminology is often not aligned between German, Italian, and English as the *lingua franca*. While the German word *Rechtsaußenparteien* offers an almost literal translation of the English 'far-right parties', no Italian term can express the same concept. If any, there is only the phrase *destra estrema*, which may merely refer to the position of a party on the political spectrum (Ignazi, 1994a), and can be considered close to the English word 'far'. However, *destra estrema* may correspond also to 'extreme right', thus indicating 'extremism', which definition in turn differs significantly within the German and Italian contexts (Ignazi, 1994a; Stöss, 2007; Backes, 2018; Ruzza, 2018, p. 718; Livi, 2023).

The second issue – with which the literature has been confronted for years – concerns both the identification of a general definition and the grouping of different parties with common traits into a 'far-right family'. Although a minimal definition is necessary to delimitate the analytical framework, a nuanced view is also needed, in order to take into account the different manifestations of the far right. On a typological level, differentiation is certainly not lacking, as far-right parties are usually categorized under different labels (neo-fascist, post-

fascist, radical, extreme, or populist radical right). However, the differences between separate parties are sometimes taken too lightly.

In Italy, Matteo Salvini's Lega and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, for example, have less in common than usually assumed. The former, while claiming more sovereignty for Italy in order to limit the EU's influence on domestic politics, is in fact still today (despite the 'national' course promoted by Salvini, who has ended the northern characterization of the erstwhile Lega Nord) a regionalist and autonomist party (de Ghantuz Cubbe 2025). The latter, on the contrary, which originates from the Italian neo-fascist tradition and defines itself as 'patriotic', is a typical nationalist party (Fratelli d'Italia 2017). Their differences, moreover, produce tensions on their cooperation with respect not only to domestic politics, but also to the international level, with Salvini holding a pro-Russia stance and Meloni supporting Ukraine (for a comparison between the two parties, see Valbruzzi/Ventura 2023).

The third issue relates to a more general problem that can only be discussed here in general terms, namely, the evolution of the far right over the years and the scholarly definitions adopted to describe it. Following a common trend that is observable in various European countries, many older far-right parties have tried, especially (but not only) in the 1990s, to adapt to new social and political landscapes. Other, more recent parties were born in such landscapes, and differ from their predecessors.

Throughout this process, alongside the 'hard' or 'traditional' far right, a 'softer' and/or 'newer' version emerged (see for example Art, 2011, p. 18; Backes and Moreau, 2021; Ignazi, 1992; Rydgren, 2018). In no way suggesting an ameliorative nuance, the latter two terms refer to some specific features of the contemporary far right, including (but not limited to): a) the

substitution of biological racism with ethnopluralism, b) the absence of paramilitary structures, c) the (ambiguous) dissociation from fascist ideology, d) the substitution of anti-Semitism for anti-Islamism, e) the acceptance of the 'essential' rules of democracy, and/or f) the refusal of violence as a method for political affirmation (see Art, 2011; Backes and Moreau, 2021, pp. 17-20; Jesse and Thieme 2011, p. 20; Rydgren, 2018, p. 24).

Parties corresponding to this *Idealtypus* or, more generally, not directly identifiable with 'traditional' far-right groups, are usually defined as 'radical right' or 'populist radical right' (see Art, 2011, pp. 10-11; Carter, 2017; Mudde, 2017). They stand between Christian-conservativism and 'hard' right extremism, their agendas aim to strengthen the 'nation' by promoting ethnic homogeneity and advocating a return to traditional values, and they adopt a striking populist style, accusing elites of prioritizing internationalism over national interests and of serving their own narrow interests at the expense of the broader population (Mudde 2017; Backes and Moreau, 2021, p. 17; Rydgren, 2018, p. 23).

However, when compared with definitions and analytical distinctions (e.g., 'old' vs. 'new'), the reality is largely marked by combinations of the two. In recent years, the convergence between traditional and newer far-right ideology, rhetoric, and personnel has been growing on many occasions blurring the distinctions between them (Copsey, 2018, p. 180; Rydgren, 2018, p. 29). Similarly, the line separating 'extreme' and 'radical' (Mudde, 2017) has also blurred (Pirro, 2023). In particular, parties of the contemporary populist radical right have been largely influenced by extremist thinkers, especially through the incorporation of ethnopluralist rhetoric (Copsey, 2018, p. 182). Both the German and the Italian far right vividly illustrate this pattern.

2. *Germany*

The history of German far-right parties is generally divided into three main phases. The first, that of the *Nachkriegsrechtsextremismus,* spanned from 1945 to the early 1950s (or, according to some interpretations, through the first half of the 1960s). The second, marked by the rise of the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), was set in the second half of the 1960s. The third, which unfolded throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, was characterized by the emergence of other far-right parties – like the Deutsche Volksunion and Die Republikaner – and the intensification of the militant activity of neo-Nazi movements and organizations (Stöss, 1989; Ignazi, 2003, pp. 63-74; Pfahl-Traughber, 2006).

Especially in the first phase, the German far right propagated a conspiratorial vision of Germany as besieged by both internal and external enemies. It capitalized on the prevailing anxieties of the postwar period, decrying what it perceived as foreign and imperialist domination over a divided nation and continent. Far-right parties framed Germany as a victim of external control, and fueled nationalist sentiment by portraying the country's fragmentation as a consequence of foreign interference (Stöss, 2010, p. 31).

Subsequently, the NPD embraced many traditional *topoi* of the first phase, including the relativization of the Nazi past and the revival of a 'great' Germany. However, the party was also able to bring new issues into its platform. Indeed, it was the first to prioritize immigration as a mobilizing topic, bringing it to the forefront of political discourse. Additionally, it condemned the erosion of traditional moral values and positioned itself against the Americanization of lifestyles (Ignazi, 2003, p. 67).

In the aftermath of the *Wiedervereinigung* and after the election of Udo Voigt as president of the NPD in 1996, the party

increasingly cooperated with neo-Nazi circles. However, the other most significant far-right parties, the DVU and, from 2002, Die Republikaner (though with numerous incoheren-cies), tried to avoid being stigmatized as extremist, aimed to appeal to a broader feeling of discontent in the reunited coun-try, and sought the support of non-extremist voters from con-servative milieus (Stöss, 2010, p. 122). The attempt to attract more voters (above all in the East), as well as the risk of being banned by German authorities, contributed to gradual trans-formations, the development of new political and communica-tion strategies, and the implementation of radical anti-estab-lishment protest, immigration critique and, in particular, anti-Islamism (Stöss, 2010, p. 145).

As demonstrated by the aggressive electoral campaigns of the NPD and DVU in 2004 (see for example Bosch, 2017, pp. 57-58), which once again addressed old *topoi* and rhetoric, such changes were all but linear and in no case implied a deep revi-sion of the traditional far right's platforms. However, especially after the economic and financial crisis of 2007/08 and the ref-ugee crisis of 2014/15, issues related to the postwar period were marginalized (though they did not disappear), while party manifestos mostly focused on national sovereignty, the Euro, and immigration.

In its manifesto for the 2017 federal election, the NPD ac-cused the EU of having "imposed an open border policy that has led to [the arrival of] millions of illegal immigrants" (NPD-Parteivorstand, n. d.). As the 2019 European Parliament elec-tions approached, the party even called for the dismantling of both the Economic and Monetary Union and the European Stability Mechanism. In line with the Brexit example, moreo-ver, it advocated Germany's withdrawal from the European Un-ion (NPD, 2019, n. p.). Finally, compared to the past, the NPD has definitely endorsed a coherent anti-American foreign

policy, coupled with an increasing alignment with Putin's Russia. (NPD, 2019, n. p.).

The party that really profited from the two crises was, however, a new party, the AfD. Founded in 2013 in response to widespread dissatisfaction with the way the Merkel government was managing the European financial crisis, the AfD radicalized in the following years, driven by its more extreme wing (Rosenfelder, 2017). Born in a historical context quite distinct from postwar times, the AfD has acknowledged the established international order, has not questioned Germany's eastern borders (at least not in its official platform), and has not expressed ambitions for the revival of the German Reich.

By referring to a vague 'liberal' tradition, the AfD declares its support for a *schlanker Staat* that minimizes "interventions limiting freedom" and confines its competences to external security, justice, foreign relations, and financial management (AfD, 2016, p. 9). At the same time, the party advocates a system of direct democracy inspired by the Swiss model, which it describes as the only remedy to the "totalitarian behavior of politicians in power" (AfD, 2021, p. 12). Finally, from an economic point of view, the AfD currently presents itself as "socially protective and a critic of capitalism", though at the same time maintaining distance from the radical anti-capitalist stance of parties such as the NPD (Backes, 2018, p. 648).

The line separating the AfD from the traditional far right is, however, a fine one. What they share is, above all, a refusal of any 'external' influence that might threaten the supposed ethnic, cultural, or linguistic homogeneity of the *Volk*. Even if no overall convergence between the AfD and the traditional far right can be observed (see Backes, 2018, p. 648), there is no doubt that the most defining feature of the AfD's political ideology is its emphasis on the *Volkgemeinschaft* and the German *Leitkultur* (Wildt, 2017). Accordingly, it is probably in its anti-

pluralist *Weltanschauung* and its opposition to multiculturalism that the AfD more closely aligns with the ideological traditions of older German far-right parties such as the NPD.

These similarities also explain the implication of the AfD in the political scandal that broke out in 2024. A covert meeting was held near Potsdam, at whose core was a debate about the deportation of asylum seekers, refugees, foreigners, and even German citizens deemed 'insufficiently integrated'. Attendees reportedly included prominent business leaders, members of neo-Nazi groups, and AfD politicians (de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2024).

3. *Italy*

The history of Italian far-right parties from 1946 up to the 1990s can be understood through two different kinds of periodization, each containing three phases, and both relating chiefly to the evolution of neo-Fascism. According to a more general periodization, the first phase, from 1946 to 1976, was marked by the marginality of the far right in the postwar political landscape. The second phase, which spanned from 1977 to 1993, saw an attempt by parts of the far right to redefine its role in Italian politics, whereas at the same time, a wave of radicalization and terrorism by extremist groups swept over the land. The third phase, starting in 1994 and extending into the following years, was characterized by the far right's systemic integration into mainstream parliamentary politics (Livi, 2023, pp. 75-76).

A second periodization, specifically focused on the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), set the first phase between 1946 and 1960, as the MSI was founded and gained strength. During the second phase, which extended from 1960 to 1983,

the party remained isolated, experienced a partial renewal, and radicalized. In the third, between 1983 and 1993, the MSI progressively gained systemic legitimacy as a recognized player in the political arena. The last phase, from 1993 to 1999, saw a major political shift as the MSI dissolved and transformed into the Alleanza Nazionale (AN) (Ignazi, 2003).

Independent of the neo-fascist tradition, though, another far-right party also emerged. In the 1980s, various localist and regionalist movements, known as the 'Leghe' (Leagues), appeared in northern Italy. In 1991, following their unification into a single group, the Lega Nord (LN) was founded. The party demanded regional autonomy from the central state, condemned the Italian Risorgimento, declared itself anti-fascist (whereas its anti-Fascism mainly coincided with opposition to the nation-state), and strongly protested against the traditional political system (Cavazza, 1995; Diamanti, 1995). Through its leader Umberto Bossi, furthermore, the LN assumed a typical populist rhetoric. By claiming to defend the interests of the northern regions, Bossi fueled an aggressive anti-establishment protest against the 'corrupted' political elites of Rome and southern Italy.

By the mid-1990s and throughout the 2000s, Italian far-right parties were repeatedly forced, due to strategical reasons, to cooperate with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI). The inclusion of the old MSI in Berlusconi's coalition was facilitated by the ideological – or, according to some interpreters, merely strategical – transformation of the MSI into the 'post-fascist' AN, which through its leader Gianfranco Fini tried to distance itself from its own most explicit ties with fascist ideology (see Ignazi, 1994b; Merkel, 1994; Morini, 2007; Ruzza, 2018).

In the subsequent years, especially beginning in the 2010s, Italian far-right parties showed an increasing propensity for populism. Founded in 2012, the Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)

originated from and within the tradition of the neo-fascist MSI. However, according to some scholars, the new party initiated a 'populist turn', as it had to come to terms "with a new political reality increasingly dominated by anti-elitist rhetoric and the centrality of the 'will of the people'" (Vampa, 2023, pp. 4-8). After initial marginality in the Italian political system, the party led by Giorgia Meloni has seen growing electoral success, culminating in Meloni's election as Prime Minister in 2022.

As for the LN, the election of Matteo Salvini as party leader in 2013 fueled an important transformation, thus marginalizing the traditional northern orientation of his predecessor Bossi. Although Salvini never abandoned the party's autonomist bias, he now claimed to represent the interests of all Italian regions, which allegedly ought to be defended from external threats such as immigration (on Salvini's Lega see de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2020; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018).

In their platforms, both Salvini's Lega and Meloni's FdI have addressed the 'risks' of 'unregulated globalism', which they claim are supported by big capital and big finance, with the 'complicity of the EU' (FdI, 2017). Though not in identical terms, both parties repeatedly portray globalization as a threat to economy, particularly to small and medium-sized Italian industries. The European Union (EU) is depicted as a corrupt organization run by bureaucrats and bankers acting against Italy's interests. Finally, immigration, especially from Muslim countries, is seen as a danger to public order (FdI, 2017; Lega, 2018).

Furthermore, both parties maintain ambiguous positions with respect to Fascism. In contrast to the LN once proudly proclaimed anti-fascist stance, Salvini cultivated ambiguity regarding neo-fascist symbology, rhetoric, and even demonstrations and violence. As for the FdI, several party members were found to have made pro-Fascist statements or been linked to

neo-fascist organizations. While Meloni has officially distanced her party from the crimes of the fascist past, she has generally shown leniency toward fascist supporters within its ranks (de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2023).

Finally, a pivotal component of their strategy is the recurrent "depiction of Fascism in a remote past and of the Left as the real threat to democracy" (Newth, 2022). By portraying accusations of Fascism as irrational, both parties seek to legitimize their stances as the voice addressing the 'real problems' of Italians. According to Meloni, the accusation of Fascism is part of a 'misleading campaign' of left-wing political discourse. In tandem, Salvini mocks his opponents' "obsession" with Fascism, framing it as both absurd and indicative of their inability to generate meaningful ideas (Newth 2022; Salvini, 2019).

However, the 'obsession' is well-founded. In 2024, an investigative report scrutinized the FdI, raising significant concerns about the party's commitment to democratic values and the authenticity of its efforts to distance itself from Italy's fascist past. The report uncovered leaked audio recordings and videos of prominent FdI politicians performing the Roman salute, making racist statements, and praising Mussolini (Fanpage, 2024).

4. *Conclusion*

In both Germany and Italy, far-right parties have skillfully adopted a populist rhetoric that resonates deeply with contemporary social grievances. Despite their differences, they share a similar path of 'recalibration' aimed at exploiting current public discontent over globalization, immigration, and the perceived erosion of national sovereignty. Such recalibration reveals a profound awareness of changing social and political

landscapes, as well as a remarkable capacity for strategical adaptation.

However, these parties still draw heavily upon traditional far-right tenets, resulting in a blurring of boundaries between 'old' and 'new'. The influence of the fascist and Nazi past remains palpable in their platforms and rhetoric, posing substantial challenges to liberal democracy in both countries. As German and Italian far-right parties gain electoral traction, they may not only reshape the political discourse surrounding the historical past, but also risk eroding fundamental democratic values.

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Meloni's Italy: A Viable "Radical Model" for the European Union?

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Abstract. A U.S. administration led by Donald Trump, with its unilateral approach, preference for bilateral relations with allies, and focus on restoring supposed American greatness through a reduction in the costs associated with maintaining the international order, may find it advantageous to promote a "Meloni political model" within the European Union (EU). This perspective helps explain the activism of Elon Musk in Europe, as he acts as a catalyst for the trans-nationalization of far-right actors across the continent, a project previously attempted (though ultimately unsuccessful) by Steve Bannon during the first Trump administration. On the other hand, the Meloni government may gradually abandon its current "dual-track" approach, which has thus far combined pragmatism in foreign policy with symbolic "culture wars" domestically, toward a fully radical stance. In this context, the so-called "external constraints" (NATO, EU institutions, and financial markets) that are often cited as limiting factors may even serve as facilitators. Ultimately, the culmination of a process that began with Berlusconi in 1994 in Italy's political landscape could be the establishment of a radical political model, an "Italian model" that could potentially be applied throughout the European Union.

Keywords: Italy's Meloni government; Radical Right; European Union; Elon Musk; Transatlantic relations; Donald Trump; External constraints.

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to examine how recent international and regional dynamics could push the Italian government toward political radicalism, arguing the Meloni executive's model of radical politics (an "Italian model") could potentially be applied throughout the European Union (EU), in the coming years. In this paper, we proceed with the following structure:

(a) We begin by outlining the strategy of Italy's current government, which we characterize as a dual-track approach. This strategy involves pragmatically balancing controversial domestic policies, particularly in areas such as immigration and justice, with a moderate international stance; (b) Next, we delve into the debate surrounding the perceived radicalization of Italian politics, asserting that the current political configuration represents the culmination of a long-term process that began under Silvio Berlusconi in 1994; (c) We then analyze the radical orientation of the Meloni government at the domestic level, contrasting it with the more moderate approach taken in international and EU affairs; (d) Moving to the international stage, we examine recent developments, such as Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. and the influence of Elon Musk in Europe, suggesting that these events may align with the promotion of an "Italian model" within the EU, a model centered on radical politics. In the conclusion, we present a set of potential limitations and counterarguments to the thesis proposed in this paper.

Italy is currently governed by a radical right government led by PM Giorgia Meloni, emerged by the victory at 2022 general election by the Italian right-wing coalition composed by *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI, Brothers of Italy), *Lega per Salvini Premier* (Lega, League) and *Forza Italia* (FI). The coalition government has so far been particularly stable, an uncommon peculiarity for

Italian politics. In almost three years the Meloni executive has adopted a "dual-track approach", balancing controversial domestic policies, particularly in areas such as immigration and justice, with a moderate stance in foreign policy.

1. *Research questions and main argument*

The main argument of the paper is that Italy may lean toward a more radical political direction in the near future and that radicalism may be used as a model at the EU level. To say so we consider both internal and external political factors that may push the country toward adopting more radical policies. Why the Meloni government, that since its formation carefully balanced a range of controversial domestic priorities, often aligning with right-wing populist ideologies on issues such as immigration and national sovereignty, with a relatively moderate position on the international stage, abandon this stance? If this approach has been so far useful for the government, with opinion pools giving Meloni and the party FdI unprecedented consensus, why it should opt for more radicalism? Moreover, what about navigating complex relationships with the European Union, NATO, and key global players, as international financial markets?

The point this chapter aims to advance is that Italy's stance internationally (including at the EU level) has been often been linked to limitations posed by external subjects (alliances, regional and international institutions). An Italian government as the current one makes no exception to the rule: after having won the election in late 2022 had to deal rather quickly with the so called "vincoli esterni" (external constraints). However, what would happen if the constraints themselves start gradually shifting towards new equilibria that are ideologically or

pragmatically sympathetic the Italian government? Could they work no more as "external constraint" but as *facilitator*, instead?

Shifts in international politics, including EU politics, have begun reshaping the context in which Italy operates, with the liberal world order undergoing major changes (Parsi, 2021)[2]. The rise of populist radical right figures like U.S. President Donald Trump, the political instability and the lack of leadership supply faced by major European powers, above all France and Germany, have already shifted the balance of power within the EU.

As these shifts unfold, Italy's role in global politics may turn increasingly relevant. With the EU in a long phase of vacuum in terms of leadership supply (Macronism being at a dead-end in France, Germany still not able to move on Merkel's era), Italy's position as a key partner of the U.S. grows, and so its ties with rising and consolidating far right political forces throughout Europe. These elements may encourage the country to adopt a more radical stance domestically and at the EU level.

The influence of external actors, including techno billionaire as Elon Musk, whose political views and global reach have sparked significant attention, adds another layer of complexity to Italy's political future (Palano, 2024)[3]. Musk's endorsement of right-wing populist figures and ideas, combined with the

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[2] The foundational principles of this order, such as multilateralism, democracy, and free trade, have been increasingly undermined by both external challenges and internal contradictions. The rise of populist and nationalist movements, along with shifting geopolitical power dynamics, has contributed to the unraveling of the post-World War II liberal framework (Parsi, 2021, among others).

[3] See Palano (2024) on the role of political parties, civil society, and the public in shaping Italy's democratic system, considering the impact of Meloni's government on the balance between traditional political structures and newer, more radical forces.

growing popularity of radical right-wing movements across Europe and the U.S., signals a global trend that may further push Italy toward radicalism. As Italy grapples with these shifting dynamics, the Meloni government must navigate a European and international context where the "old external constraints," such as NATO obligations and European Union institutions, are now witnessing the emergence of new political balances. These new balances, increasingly aligned with the radical right, present both opportunities and challenges for Italy's role in Europe and on the global stage. In this delicate moment, the Meloni government faces the challenge of navigating between maintaining Italy's traditional alliances and adapting to the changing political realities in Europe and beyond. The pressures of political instability within the EU, coupled with the growing prominence of figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk, suggest that Italy may be pushed further toward a more radical political stance (see also Clementi, Haglund and Locatelli, 2017). This shift is not merely a response to domestic concerns but is also deeply intertwined with broader geopolitical changes, especially in the context of transatlantic relations and the evolving role of the radical right within European politics. As the article will demonstrate, the current political moment in Italy, shaped by these global trends, may push the government to adopt more radical policies that redefine its position both within the EU and on the international stage.

2. *On the "dual track" and pragmatism (2022-2024)*

While the Meloni government continues to navigate a complex European and international landscape, it faces mounting pressures that could lead to a greater embrace of radical right-wing ideologies. With the rise of global populist movements and

shifting political balances within the EU, Italy's political future is increasingly uncertain. The growing influence of external actors, including Donald Trump and Elon Musk, further complicates the situation, making it clear that Italy's political trajectory may veer towards a more radicalized stance. This article will explore how these changes may impact Italy's domestic and foreign policies, reshaping its role within the European Union and its position on the global stage.

The Italian right-wing coalition, which won the 2022 election (Bruno, 2022), represents a very interesting case study for analyzing how radical right-wing political parties, and their leaders, flexibly adapt to a rapidly evolving international context. To date (2022-2025), the Meloni executive and her party, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) has worked on a "dual track" (*doppio binario*): on one hand, domestic policies have shown some elements of radicalism, on issues like immigration and justice; on the other hand, in European and international affairs, a pragmatic and moderate approach was used, mainly due to the constraints imposed by alliances and membership in the European Union (EU). Many analysts have noted that while domestically the government has adopted symbolic policies focused on "culture wars," emphasizing border defense, the fight against illegal immigration, and the promotion of traditional values, in foreign policy, it has followed the path set by previous governments (with the notable exception of the Conte I government), not least the Draghi government, in this sense Meloni supported Ukraine against Russian aggression, maintaining a strong transatlantic stance.

3. *The issue of the radicalization of Italian politics (2011-2022)*

The issue of the supposed ongoing radicalization of Italian politics is complex. There has clearly been a major transition from Berlusconi's dominated era and right-wing coalitions (1994-2011) to the rise of new leaders like Salvini and Meloni. But has this moved the center of gravity of the center-right towards more radical positions? Has this been a gradual and incremental change or a radical shift. According to Bruno, Downes and Scopelliti (2024) the shift happened but does not necessarily represent a mass radicalization of Italian society.

The 2011 *crisi dello spread* is identified as a turning point that led to Berlusconi's decline and opened the way for new political forces within the center-right, a process of gradual radicalization over the last decade, led by the new or renewed parties, FdI or Salvini's Lega (2011-2022). The "post-Berlusconi" coalitions show a change in the balance of power among the parties. While Berlusconi had already mainstreamed the Italian Social Movement (MSI) by including it in his coalition, the new coalitions have seen a greater influence from parties like the League and FdI, which hold more radical views on issues such as immigration, gender rights, and economic *souverainism.*

While both parties are considered part of the radical right, FdI has a deeper historical and ideological tradition, linked to the MSI and National Alliance (AN), whereas the League has a more recent history and is often driven by a more pragmatic and populist approach. FdI has adopted an increasingly ambiguous stance toward its fascist heritage (Bruno and Downes, 2023).

Following Berlusconi's decline, Matteo Salvini's League experienced a rapid ascent, briefly becoming the leading

force within the right-wing coalition. This period was characterized by a populist and *souverainist* rhetoric. The League changed its name from Northern League to League Salvini Premier. The League's dominance was short-lived. Fratelli d'Italia led by Giorgia Meloni, eventually rose to become the dominant force in the center-right. Despite the changes, the sources highlight elements of continuity, such as the constant presence of the radical right in Italian politics since 1990. The sources also note a shared populist and *souverainist* rhetoric among various leaders.

A number of scholars have highlighted a complex picture in which Italian politics has been influenced by the rise of populist and radical right parties, the financial crisis of 2011, and the increasingly widespread use of social media, emphasizing that political dynamics are constantly evolving, with a continuous repositioning of the forces at play (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2022; Albertazzi et al. 2018; 2021). In this sense, the rise of the radical right should be seen not a sudden phenomenon, but rather part of a broader trend of normalization, which is facilitated by the use of social media and the blurring of lines between the traditional right and the radical right (Pirro 2023)[4].

Bruno et al (2021) emphasize that there is a process of radicalization of traditional political forces and, consequently, a "normalization" of far-right ideas. This is evident in the use of symbols, slogans, and languages that tend to blur the lines between the moderate and radical right. Castelli Gattinara and Froio (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2021), among others, analyze the dynamics among the various

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[4] Pirro (2023) in particular discusses the significance of the term "far-right" as an umbrella concept, suggesting that this is a useful framework for understanding a variety of different right-wing political parties and movements.

parties of the Italian right, including the tensions and collaborations between Forza Italia, the League, and Brothers of Italy (FdI), as well as their differing ideological and strategic positions. Casteli Gattinara, Froio and Pirro (2021) have also investigated possible factors behind mobilization of radical right and far right, in particular focusing on grievances, opportunities, and resources. These elements interact in complex ways, shaping the extent and nature of radical right mobilization. Grievances encompass economic struggles (e.g., high unemployment), cultural tensions (such as increased migration), and institutional dissatisfaction (e.g., discontent with democracy). Opportunities refer to favorable political and discursive conditions, such as a fragmented government or access to public platforms. Resources include both the organizational capacity of the group and its material and symbolic assets. Notably, these factors do not function independently but interact to either amplify or diminish mobilization.

4. *"Culture wars" at home*

It is possible to say that since the 2022 victory at the Italian general election, the rightwing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni and her party FdI, has been following a playbook based on highly controversial policy issues, with the aim to politicize areas with crucial symbolical importance. In this sense we may speak of culture wars[5].

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[5] The concept of "culture wars" was first popularized by American sociologist James Davison Hunter in his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Hunter used the term to describe the growing ideological divide in the United States between conservative and progressive values, particularly regarding issues like abortion, education, religion, and LGBT rights.

Migration and social are policy areas that have provide some fertile ground. With the Albania Agreement, the Meloni government established a protocol with Albania to process asylum seekers outside the European Union. This approach faced legal challenges, with Italian courts blocking the rapid expulsion of asylum seekers to Albania, questioning the legality of processing asylum applications outside EU borders. With the asylum Status Revocation the government initiated measures to remove asylum status from individuals who had previously been granted international protection, particularly targeting foreigners with criminal convictions. With the Surrogacy Ban Extension, in October 2024, the Italian Senate voted to extend the country's ban on surrogacy to include couples who travel abroad for the procedure. Critics argue that this policy disproportionately affects same-sex couples seeking to become parents.

To these, we may add the so called "Premierato". It refers to a proposed constitutional reform in Italy aimed at strengthening the powers of the Prime Minister. Under this reform, the Prime Minister would be directly elected by voters, and the winning coalition would be guaranteed 55% of the seats in parliament. This initiative is a priority for Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government, which argues that it will provide greater political stability and more effective governance. However, the proposal has sparked significant controversy. Critics contend that the "Premierato" could disrupt the balance of power within Italy's political system, potentially leading to an excessive concentration of authority in the executive branch. Concerns have been raised that such a shift might undermine

democratic checks and balances, echoing historical instances of authoritarianism in Italy[6].

5. *Between pragmatism and "external constraints": moderation abroad*

At the European and international level, the current Italian executive under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has largely embraced a path of moderation and pragmatism. This approach has been particularly evident in Italy's engagement with key international and European frameworks, reflecting a continued commitment to both the European Union and NATO. In terms of foreign policy, Italy's position under Meloni has been one of cautious consistency, seeking to balance national interests with its role in the global order. This is notably reflected in Italy's response to the war in Ukraine, which offers a clear example of continuity with the policies of the previous government (see for instance Isernia et al. 2024; Vignoli and Coticchia, 2024; Zavershinskaia, 2025; Zavershinskaia and Spera, 2024). As Bruno and Fazio (2023) have observed, despite initial concerns and skepticism regarding Meloni's foreign policy direction, especially given her party's historical associations with more Eurosceptic and nationalist positions, there has been little to no disruption in Italy's stance on critical international issues, particularly when it comes to supporting Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression.

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[6] As of June 2024, the Italian Senate approved the initial stages of this constitutional reform. The process of amending the constitution requires either a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament or a majority approval in a popular referendum. Given the opposition from various political parties, it is anticipated that the reform will ultimately be decided through a referendum.

Although Meloni and her coalition were initially viewed with some uncertainty by international observers, particularly with regard to their potential approach to European unity and international alliances, the reality has been one of significant alignment with broader European and transatlantic positions. Under the leadership of Meloni, Italy has reaffirmed its commitment to Ukraine, continuing to support military and economic aid, as well as endorsing EU sanctions against Russia. This continuity can be understood not only as a reflection of Meloni's strategic decisions but also as a result of the constraints posed by Italy's international commitments. Italy, being a member of both the European Union and NATO, has faced a clear responsibility to align with the broader Western coalition. This geopolitical positioning has pushed the Meloni government to adhere to Italy's longstanding alliances, regardless of the party's more populist rhetoric.

Additionally, the Meloni administration has underscored Italy's role within the EU, repeatedly emphasizing its integration with European institutions. The government has made it clear that Italy's future is firmly anchored in Europe, demonstrating a pragmatic understanding that the country's national security, economic interests, and political stability are closely tied to European cooperation. Despite early fears that the new government might seek to take a more isolationist or critical stance toward the EU, the government has largely adhered to EU policies and priorities, particularly those related to the war in Ukraine. This approach also highlights a broader trend of pragmatism, as Meloni's government has not pursued drastic shifts in policy, but instead focused on sustaining Italy's strong role within the Western alliance. Again, this commitment to moderation and continuity reflects a broader tendency of Italian political leaders to prioritize stability and predictability in foreign policy, regardless of domestic political shifts. Even

though Meloni's rhetoric has sometimes emphasized nationalism, the structure of Italy's external relations (based on "vincolo esterno", external constraints) has effectively limited the scope for radical departures from established policies. This continuity in Italy's foreign policy suggests that the government, despite its political differences from the Draghi administration, has found it essential to uphold Italy's longstanding international relationships, particularly with the EU and NATO. In this context, Meloni's leadership has not only focused on preserving Italy's credibility within these organizations but has also positioned the country as a reliable partner in addressing global challenges, from security threats to economic crises.

6. *Goodbye to the "dual track" (2025-). Toward radical positions?*

More recently, due to an international and European context shaped by the Trump victory in the United States and the political crises in France and Germany, the Italian government and its leader, PM Giorgia Meloni, are often pointed to as a potential "political model" for the entire EU. In this sense, a revision of the strategy employed so far by the Italian government, which we have defined as the "dual track" (i.e. moderate internationally, less moderate domestically), may take place.

At the international level, the triumphant return of Donald Trump in the United States will certainly have a significant impact on liberal democracies and old allies. The previous Trump presidency (2017-2021) showed a preference for bilateral relations with individual countries rather than multilateral institutions, an approach that will redefine transatlantic dynamics. In this context, Italy could emerge as a privileged partner for the

United States, given the political alignment between the two leaders. Meloni's invitation to the inauguration of Trump's second term is a signal of this potential partnership. At the European level, it is undeniable that the EU is going through a crisis in terms of political leadership supply: France and Germany, for different reasons, seem unable to provide viable leadership options. The combination of political instability and economic fragility in these countries represents a significant challenge and could have repercussions for the entire EU.

In France, although the presidency has been held by Emmanuel Macron since 2017, the political situation remains fluid and precarious, unable to express the leadership desperately needed within the EU. Elected in the months following Brexit (and the first Trump victory) with great hopes from supporters of the European integration project, Macron has failed to maintain the hopes of a renewed Europeanism. His leadership has been significantly weakened in recent years, amidst social protests, rising public debt, and great political fragmentation. While it is true that, at least for now, the radical right led by the *Rassemblement National* has not prevailed in decisive elections, the trend in political support is certainly unfavorable to the current president.

Likewise, Germany seem uncapable of providing any reassurance in terms of political leadership for the EU, as it awaits the outcome of the federal elections in Germany on February 23 to elect members of the new parliament. Since 2022, "orphaned" by Angela Merkel's chancellorship (2005-2021), it is now grappling with a deep economic-political crisis, rather surprising given its position as the EU's leading economic power and one of the world's top manufacturing and exporting countries. While the party *CDU/CSU* is still in the process of reorganization after Merkel's era, the *SPD* party of current Chancellor Scholz, seems unable to pick up Merkel's baton, neither

in Germany nor in Europe. At the same time, an Eurosceptic and extreme-right party, unthinkable only a few years ago, the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD), is on the rise.

7. *An Italian model for the EU: The case of the re-migration policy*

An interesting case of how Meloni's Italy could be seen as a "political model" for the EU can be seen in the policy field, in particular referring to re-emigration policy. The Italian government under PM Giorgia Meloni has implemented a migration policy involving an agreement with Albania to process asylum seekers outside the European Union's borders. This policy has been lauded by EU top officials (AP News, 2024) and EU member states' leaders, but also criticized within Italy.

In November 2023, Italy and Albania signed a protocol allowing Italy to transfer up to 3,000 migrants per month to Albanian processing centers. These centers, funded by Italy, are designed to handle asylum applications of individuals rescued in the Mediterranean. The agreement aims to alleviate the migration burden on Italy by outsourcing parts of the asylum process. However, its implementation has faced significant legal challenges. Italian courts have repeatedly blocked the transfer of migrants to Albania, citing concerns over the legality and human rights implications of the arrangement. As of February 2025, the European Court of Justice is reviewing the plan to determine its compliance with EU law. The Italy-Albania migration policy has received mixed reactions from European leaders and institutions. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen recognized the agreement as a potential model for EU migration management. The German Chancellor has not publicly commented directly on Italy's agreement

with Albania. However, Scholz has been actively engaged in Germany's internal debates on migration. In a recent televised debate, he and opposition leader Friedrich Merz discussed immigration policies and their stance against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Scholz emphasized the importance of maintaining a firm stance on migration while rejecting any collaboration with the AfD. The leader of the latter, Alice Weidel, has clearly stated that it looks to the Italian government and Giorgia Meloni's leadership as a model, especially regarding immigration policies (LaPresse, 2025).

In this sense it is possible to say the Meloni government's approach to certain contentious policy areas, particularly migration, has positioned it as a model for some European leaders and right-wing political movements. This perception arises because Meloni has successfully implemented policies that resonate with a broader European trend toward stricter migration control and national sovereignty, key issues in contemporary political debates. Beyond migration, the Meloni government is perceived as an interesting model in other politicized policy areas, such as economic nationalism, cultural identity, and EU relations. Meloni balances a nationalist, sovereignty-driven rhetoric with pragmatic engagement with EU institutions, an approach that appeals to both right-wing governments and conservative opposition parties across Europe. Germany's AfD and France's National Rally (RN), as we have seen, have looked at Meloni's strategy as a way to gain mainstream credibility while maintaining a tough stance on key issues like migration and national identity. Moreover, while Meloni shares certain nationalist views with Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, she has taken a more cooperative approach with Brussels, making her a potential bridge between sovereigntist and mainstream conservative forces.

8. *Italy and the role of Elon Musk in the EU: a far-right catalyst*

To the potentially favorable international and European context for a "radical political model" represented by Italy and its executive, we may add another element that could possibly act as a catalyst: the role played by Elon Musk. Recently, Musk expressed support for a "Make Europe Great Again" movement in Europe, echoing the MAGA slogan that made Trump famous. A similar project was attempted, and failed, at the dawn of the Trump era, when Steve Bannon was sent to Europe to try to unite and federate European far-right parties into a single project (Fazio, Bruno and Kaunert, 2023).

Bannon had emerged as a pivotal figure in the transnational political landscape, playing a key role in shaping and influencing the far-right movements both in Europe and the United States. His efforts were instrumental in facilitating the alignment of far-right political parties and extremist groups across these regions, promoting a shared ideological agenda that has allowed these disparate factions to coalesce into a transnational movement. Through his connections and strategic efforts, Bannon played the role of a "facilitator of transnationalization," bridging the gap between various far-right entities and fostering a common narrative that spans multiple continents. One of his most significant achievements was his involvement in the formation of the political bloc known as Identity and Democracy (ID) in the European Parliament in 2019. By leveraging his relationships with key far-right leaders such as Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Matteo Salvini in Italy, Bannon helped unite these political figures under a common banner, enabling them to exert more influence within the European political sphere. This collaboration marked a decisive moment in the

consolidation of far-right politics at the European level, with Bannon playing a central role in uniting parties that were once ideologically fragmented[7].

Bannon's ambition, however, extended beyond mere political cooperation. His establishment of the "Academy for the Judeo-Christian West" at the Trisulti Monastery in Italy is perhaps one of the most emblematic aspects of his efforts to shape the future of far-right politics. The academy was conceived as an educational institution aimed at training the next generation of far-right leaders, offering a space where young political leaders could be indoctrinated with a vision that aligns with Bannon's nationalist and anti-liberal values. His initiative was seen as a direct counter to liberal institutions, particularly those associated with George Soros, whose vision for global governance Bannon and his allies vehemently opposed. The strategic choice of Italy as the location for this academy was no accident. Italy's history, including its association with fascist ideologies during the 20th century, made it a symbolic and strategic ground for the cultivation of far-right ideas. Bannon considered Italy to be a crucial center for driving political change, not only within Europe but also globally. He envisioned Italy as the epicenter of a new transnational far-right movement, with the potential to spread these nationalist and anti-globalist values across borders, challenging the established political order.

Bannon's project in Europe, aimed at uniting far-right parties under a single political platform, failed for several reasons[8].

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[7] Traditional liberal democracies are undergoing significant transformation, with elites sometimes reinforcing democratic norms and at other times undermining them (see among others Campati, 2022).

[8] Although Bannon's vision for the academy ultimately faced significant opposition, leading to the shutdown of the institution, the impact of his ideas did not dissipate in Europe (let alone the US). Bannon's influence continues

The main ones were the deep ideological and strategic differences between the leaders of various nationalist parties, each focused on the interests of its own country. Furthermore, opposition from some European governments and the lack of clear economic and organizational support limited the project.

After Bannon's experience was archived, Musk seems to have adopted the above mentioned highly ambitious political project "MEGA" In this sense, the owner of Tesla appears determined to use the Meloni government model as an example for the entire EU[9]. The techno-billionaire, who has been appointed by Trump as the head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is currently under EU investigation into X regarding concerns over content moderation and the dissemination of misinformation (Chambers, 2025). Likewise, Musk has faced criticism for his endorsement of far-right political parties in Europe, notably the AfD, described as "the last spark of hope for this country" in a December 2024 editorial (Politico, 28 December 2024). Musk's remarks have elicited responses from European political figures. In Germany, Chancellor Olaf Scholz remarked that many individuals on social media seek attention through provocative slogans, emphasizing

to resonate, particularly in Italy, where he has successfully brought his ideological framework to several Italian political leaders. His role in fostering these connections and advancing a transnational far-right agenda highlights the growing influence of such movements in shaping the future of global politics, with Italy serving as a key focal point in this larger ideological struggle.

[9] After all, the AfD, recently supported by Musk with great fanfare, has often stated that it looks to the Italian government and Giorgia Meloni's leadership as a model, especially regarding immigration policies (LaPresse, 2025). In the past, top officials of the EU institutions and of the German government, including Von der Leyen and Olaf Scholz, had expressed interest in the model proposed by Italy. For a review of the EU policies on migration, see Ceccorulli, Fassi and Lucarelli (2020).

the principle that "one should not feed the troll." Friedrich Merz, likely to become the next chancellor, succeeding Olaf Scholz, called Musk's piece "intrusive and presumptuous" in a social media post. In the United Kingdom Musk has been outspoken in his criticism of British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, asserting that those who propagate falsehoods and misinformation on a large scale are not concerned with the victims but with their own interests. These developments underscore Musk's increasing influence on European political discourse and raise broader questions about the role of major technology platforms in shaping public debate and the dissemination of information. Furthermore, Musk has previously expressed strong opposition to left-leaning political leaders, including Olaf Scholz himself, whom he has referred to in derogatory terms.

9. *Possible setbacks and backlashes to Italy's model*

Elon Musk's activism in Europe is a catalyst for a wide project. It seeks to replicate Trump's victory by pushing Meloni as a viable "political model" at the EU level. The gamble could, however, face a series of resistances and obstacles:

(i) The first concern pertains the methods used by Musk. His highly direct and polarizing interventions on key political issues come with risks: whether it is the politicization of the judiciary in Italy (concerning Italian immigration centers in Albania) or supporting the AfD in Germany (where he urged Germans not to feel guilty for the sins of their parents or grandparents), Musk has often been accused of interfering in the affairs of sovereign countries, causing strong political reactions. It cannot be ruled out that Musk's interference in other countries' affairs could lead to backlash, using economic means to

strike at his interests (e.g., Tesla and Starlink); (ii) A second risk concerns the relationship between Musk and Trump, which is currently very strong but could easily take a turn for the worse in the future. If Musk were to fall out of favor with Trump, the MEGA project concerning the far-right and extreme-right in Europe could suffer a fatal blow, as evidenced by Bannon's case; (iii)Finally, the possible "political model" of Italy for the EU, which Musk and Meloni seem determined to follow, carries an element of risk also due to potential "overestimation" by the Italian government. Excessively radical positions (both as narratives and policies) could provoke an unexpectedly strong political and judicial backlash, as the case of Libyan general Njeem Osama Almasri seems to indicate. Accused by the International Criminal Court of war crimes and crimes against humanity, Almasri was arrested in Turin on January 19, 2025, and released few days later, due to a presumed procedural error before being deported to Libya. This led to investigations by the Rome Public Prosecutor's Office against PM Meloni and other government members for aiding and abetting and embezzlement.

9. *Conclusions*

The Meloni government finds itself at a critical juncture, with the opportunity to shape itself as a potential "political model" for the European Union in the years ahead. This possibility is made all the more tangible by shifting political and economic dynamics both within Europe and across the Atlantic. In particular, the rising influence of figures like Donald Trump, should he secure a second term in office, coupled with the growing economic power of individuals such as Elon Musk, could further solidify a political climate in the EU increasingly

favorable to radical-right ideologies. Such a political shift at the EU level could create a scenario where Meloni's government and like-minded forces find themselves in a classic "win-win" situation, advancing their agenda while aligning with broader geopolitical trends.

However, the path forward is not without significant risks for both Meloni's government and its international allies. The Italian government's future decisions, especially regarding domestic policy, will be crucial in determining whether it continues with its current "dual track" strategy (balancing more moderate and radical policies) or takes a more decisive turn toward extreme positions. Such a shift could trigger stronger opposition both within Italy and across the European Union, potentially destabilizing its political footing. On the other hand, a second term for Trump would present him with limited time to push through his political agenda. His ability to advance this vision, particularly in the face of potential resistance from both domestic political opponents and EU leaders, is far from certain. Furthermore, while Trump's relationship with high-profile figures like Elon Musk has thus far been politically advantageous, there are signs that this alliance could become a double-edged sword in the future, especially as Musk's own influence and business interests may complicate the political calculus. Lastly, when considering the broader implications of the "MEGA" project, Bannon's ill-fated attempt to spread right-wing populism throughout Europe, it is important to remember that similar efforts have ended in failure in the past, underscoring the risks involved in pursuing such an ambitious political agenda.

In conclusion, while the Meloni government and its international allies face a potential window of opportunity to advance a radical-right agenda within the EU, they must tread carefully, balancing ambition with pragmatism in order to

avoid (1) alienating key domestic and European stakeholders (2) align a range political and economic entities that oppose the aforementioned project, yet are currently isolated. The risks of overreach could undermine their long-term goals, making the future uncertain for all parties involved.

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