

## **The politics of Brexit in a wavering Europe**

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By some measures, the countries of the European Union appear to be relatively stable democracies, especially when looking at the political upheavals that are shaking the United States – where a much-indicted former president is likely to be the Republican candidate next year – and the UK, where the Conservatives are facing an implosion after having gone through five Prime Ministers in seven years. In Europe, on the whole, it seems that the adults are still in charge, with the stolid Scholtz taking over in Germany in 2021, the centrist Macron last year winning re-election in France, and more recently Sánchez in Spain seeing off, for now, the far-right threat. Yet, all is not well and the corrosive politics that characterised Brexit and Trump have also firmly taken root in even some of the more wholesome-looking European countries.

Wholesome, of course, being code for Scandinavia, that one-time bastion of European social democracy and the welfare state. If things are tough there, with the far-right sharing power directly and indirectly, in Finland and Sweden and the Danish Labour party adopting part of the extreme-right's vision on migration, how bad must it be elsewhere in Europe? Western Europe that is, because many of the former East Bloc countries have been treading the path to an illiberal and nationalist tyranny of the majority for years now. Until recently, Western Europe, except Austria at one point, seemed more adept at resisting these currents. But now the dam has broken, with the far right actually in power in Italy and running strong in opinion polls in Germany and France. The French general elections are still four years away, but with Macron not being able to run again, the spectre of a Marine Le Pen presidency is looming ever larger. And in Germany, the far-right AfD is now polling higher than Scholtz's Social Democrats, the largest coalition party.

At this point, some might object to the linkage between British Brexit politics and the far-right in Europe. Even many once-ardent Remainers, eager to move on because of political expediency or starting to display symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome, are beginning to cover the more egregious parts of the Leave ideology with the mantle of love. But let's be clear that Brexit's formula ran something like four parts xenophobia, three parts nationalism, two parts anti-establishment anger and one part Tory internecine power play. I de-prioritise the latter, because in the end it was the people's votes that mattered. The way this was achieved also fits right in with the mostly right-wing driven polarisation and radicalisation of politics, with facts not counting for much, appeals to the basest of instincts and fearmongering. It's ironic that the Remain campaign got stuck with the label 'project fear', while it was Nigel Farage who summoned the image of foreign hordes overrunning the UK with his infamous poster of refugees. It's this kind of politics and the way it's practiced that is threatening to undermine the stability of democratic systems, as can be seen from the US and UK examples.

This is not to say that Brexit politics has caused the drift towards polarisation, exploitation of anti-migration sentiment and post-truth campaigning in the rest of Europe. Many of these trends had been well established on the continent for many years, even decades. If anything, Brexit dampened anti-EU sentiments in many countries and British political and economic disarray may even have served as a warning to others. Yet, Brexit in the UK and Trump in the

US are some of the clearest expressions of how seemingly mature democracies can very quickly find themselves on a downward path towards disrespect for international and domestic rules, neighbouring countries and anyone who doesn't vote for the ruling party. As has happened in parts of Eastern Europe, Brexit ended up as a tyranny of the majority, with the slightest of electoral

margins being taken as a blank check for also ditching the Customs Union and the Common Market. In the US, where Trump didn't even win the popular vote in 2016, he and his acolytes interpreted being in power as a god given right to steamroller the opposition, including doing whatever it took to try stay in power. The US and the UK offer the best examples of mainstream conservative parties being taken over by, or at least heavily beholden to, the far-right.

Most European countries have electoral systems that differ from the UK and US models. Coalitions are always counted on to moderate the worst of one party's excesses. But that has not been the case in, for example, Hungary and Poland where the right's initial electoral success was used to silence media, pack courts and introduce one-sided reforms. It's harder to see that happening in countries such as Germany and France, and even Italy, but, alas, not unthinkable. Right-wing attacks on independent journalists and media and even the judiciary are now regular occurrences in many European countries. Think of the UK, judges were called 'Enemies of the People' for making the then government stick to the law on activating article 50 for leaving the EU and where recently the government's own justice minister, the Lord Chancellor, ranted against 'lefty lawyers'. The far-right in Europe uses similar rhetoric in many cases. Research from 2020, for example, shows how this works in the Netherlands and Switzerland. As in the UK, in many European countries, national broadcasters often seen as a bulwark against partisan or overly commercial news outlets, are under attack, mostly from the right, as with the AfD in Germany. Italy's RAI has for years now been under attack, with Meloni or her government this year allegedly forcing out the broadcaster's head. Far-right followers now regularly preface the name of state broadcasters with the label 'lying'.

No Western European country seems yet to be in danger of having one far-right party take over, as happened in Hungary and to an extent in Poland. But there too, it was the more mainstream conservative parties that at times offered an opening, through coalitions or parliamentary cooperation, for these more extreme parties to gain respectability and electoral credibility. The willingness of many current European conservative politicians to breach the formal or informal cordons sanitaires poses one of the biggest challenges to keeping out the far-right and the corrosive politics associated with it. From Spain, where the PP has been willing to align with Vox, to coalitions and cooperation in Finland and Sweden, this risks letting populism in through the front door. Ominously, leaders of conservative parties in the Netherlands, where elections are coming up later this year and Germany, where state elections will be held, have opened the door to cooperation with far-right parties. The adoption of harsh anti-migration rhetoric by mainstream parties, on the right and the left, is then maybe the backdoor. Taken together, it means that Europe might soon be in for a similarly polarising and abrasive political ride as the UK and the US have been on.