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## The European Lurch to the Right

Arjun Appadurai

*NGS editorial board*, [aa133@nyu.edu](mailto:aa133@nyu.edu)

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Right-wing regimes around the world are enjoying a fresh lease on life, after their first flush of victories in the period dominated by Trump, Modi, Erdogan and Orban, as well as the veterans, Putin and Xi Jinping. Today seems to be a 2.0 moment for global authoritarianisms, this time with its epicenter in Europe, and its tentacles in Israel, India and Argentina.

Consider Germany, my own nation of residence, where the centrist regime of Olaf Schultz is being heavily pressured by the far right, especially the AFD party and its sympathizers. Consider the Netherlands, where the Dutch Trump, Geert Wilders, could become the next Prime Minister. Marion Le Pen dogs Macron's footsteps in France. Giorgia Meloni of Italy has managed to clean up her image quickly after a long career spent in an extreme right-wing Italian Party, and has included her photo-ops with Narendra Modi as part of her remake of "Roman Holiday". Victor Orban holds on to a solid base of Christian, anti-Muslim and anti-EU followers in Hungary. Rishi Sunak represents the glamorous look of the wealthy Indian diaspora and is a firm member of the Tory upper-classes and loses no opportunity to hug both Modi and Meloni, among other unsavory characters from within and beyond the Tory Party. In Austria, the far-Right Freedom Party is growing more powerful by the month, and its rise reminds us that Austria, beyond Vienna and a few other small towns, is a dismally closed and xenophobic society. Finland is ruled by a right-wing government and Spain has managed to avoid a right-wing coalition narrowly, a little bit like France under Macron.

So, what is the European lurch to the right about? The first answer is that few citizens of the European Union – whatever their national identities, love the European Union. The EU is an abstract idea, which has never succeeded in tapping or replacing the love of its individual nations, however fractious, artificial or recent they might be. Thus, the EU is about pragmatic calculations, as with all transnational alliances, and these calculations are not working in its favor. Insofar as the politics of the European Union remains liberal and technocratic, the failure of the idea of Europe to attract any deep loyalty is the broadest factor in the rise of the European right, which can also be seen as reflecting a re-assertion of national identities in Europe.

There is a more immediate trigger for the European rightwing parties and leaders. This is the stubborn Israeli effort to destroy Gaza in the name of destroying

Hamas. The events in Israel and Palestine since October 7, when Hamas launched a shocking attack on the Israeli side of the Gaza border, have triggered a tremendous wave of sympathy for Israel in Europe, and the sources of this pro-Israel turn are to be found in Europe's own worries about Islam, about Muslim migrants and the revived need to seal European borders. Many European leaders – from Rishi Sunak to Giorgia Meloni - have come out strongly against migrants from the Global South, and here Europe draws on its crypto-Christian, anti-Muslim tradition with roots going back at least as far as the Crusades. This anti-Muslim tradition has been re-activated by the pro-Israel forces in Europe, and has created a set of associations between Hamas, Palestinians, Muslim migrants in Europe and an equation of anti-Israel views with antisemitism. In Germany it is impossible to be critical of the Israeli State without being labelled as an anti-Semite, and this equation dominates politics, culture and civil society. It has also pitted the German police against the Muslim neighborhoods of Germany, such as Neukölln in Berlin, where the distinction between law-abiding Muslim citizens and radical Islamists has almost vanished. Germany, of course, has a special reason to bend over backwards to support Israel, because of its horrendous record in the Holocaust of the Nazi period. But the fear of Muslim migrants, youth and neighborhoods, from Denmark and France to Italy and Sweden, has become one more source of hostility against the European Union, which is seen as soft on migration. Thus, anti-Muslim sentiments have become revitalized as additional sources of right-wing trends in Europe, which already tilt towards xenophobia and fear of migrant populations.

There is another, less obvious source of the pan-European turn to the right. And that is the subterranean presence of Russia and Putin. On the American side of the Atlantic, we have already seen in Donald Trump a pro-Putin stance, which does not fit with traditional American anti-Communism and the official beliefs of most cold warriors in the US government. The bizarre bromance of Putin and Trump is a clue to the European swing to the right, because it unveils the attractions of Putin's autocratic skills, his "make Russia great again" philosophy in Georgia, Crimea and most famously in Ukraine. Since Putin has strategic energy-based power over many European states, notably with Germany, there is a *realpolitik* underlying the care with which many European leaders, including Macron, Scholz and even Meloni approach Putin. But energy is not the sole reason for Putin's attractiveness to many European right wing leaders.

The biggest threat for Putin is NATO, and the teeth behind NATO are largely the United States and its military might. Insofar as NATO is the armed face of the European Union, the nationalist right-wing throughout Europe has a strong shared antipathy towards the Brussels-led vision of the European Union, and thus also against the old post-World War II vision of a Europe led by the victorious Allied powers under the tutelage of the United States. In this regard, the anti-liberal, anti-EU politics of the European right shares a great deal with Putin's hostility to the United States and to NATO, especially on its own borders. Putin inherits the old idea of an expansive imperial Russia built on nationalism, authoritarian rule and armed power, which has no use for the Western liberal model of democracy, human rights and electoral rule. In this sense Putin has more in common with the different parties of the European Right than they do with their own liberal opponents, who are often strong supporters of the EU.

The Italian case is instructive. Putin had a longstanding dislike of Mario Draghi, the previous Prime Minister of Italy, the EU central banker and technocrat, and has even been accused of conniving to oust him in 2022. The results are ambiguous for Putin, since the new Prime Minister of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, unlike her allies on the Italian right, such as the late Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini, has taken a much friendlier approach to Biden and to EU leaders like Olaf Scholz. This is particularly evident in her strong support of Ukraine's military struggle against Russian domination. However, Meloni has had a very difficult time fulfilling her election promises to stem the tide of North African illegal migration to Italy. She is also trying to thread the needle between alienating Brussels, whose economic support Italy desperately needs, and placating her right-wing voters, who have no use for the European Union. So, Italy is now poised to make a difficult choice between the anti-EU countries (Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands) and her allies in Germany, Brussels, the UK and the USA.

Still, Putin's fears about NATO and the USA are not the most powerful drivers of the growing European swing to the Right. The sources are also more global. They must be seen in the light of the failure of neo-liberal policies across the world in delivering basic improvements in well-being to the majority of citizens in many countries. There is a special reason to pay attention to the failures of neo-liberalism around the world, since there is a widespread tendency both in media accounts and in social science scholarship from the left to see the widening employment failures of

Europe and the USA as being balanced by some degree of economic benefit for the poorer and working classes of the Global South. The evidence against this hydraulic view of Western jobs migrating east and south, comes from many excellent studies, many not from progressive platforms, that agree on the widening gap between the wealthy and poor classes across the world in the era of neo-liberalism. In countries like India, China, Brazil, Argentina, and much of the Middle-East and Africa, the growth in wealth and in GDP has enriched a tiny class of super wealthy entrepreneurs, corporate bosses and family firms, while the bottom 50% of these populations has been growing steadily less wealthy. Hujo (2021) makes this point forcefully, while citing a wide range of additional sources (see links) which reinforce this point:

Inequality, a topic which was largely neglected during three decades of neoliberal globalisation, has finally made its way back into public debates. Numerous people across the globe are protesting inequalities, while a significant body of scientific evidence shows that income and wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few ([Credit Suisse, 2019](#); [Oxfam, 2018](#); [World Inequality Lab, 2018](#)). The negative effects of this process have been widely demonstrated: high inequality and the associated concentration of power results in policies and laws biased in the interest of elites, undermining democratic governance, development, poverty reduction, environment, social cohesion and wellbeing ([Bartels, 2008](#); [Chancel, 2017](#); [Gilens, 2012](#); [Stiglitz, 2012](#); [Therborn, 2013](#); [UNDP, 2019](#); [UNRISD, 2010](#); [Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009](#)) (Hujo 2021: 343).

It is important to hazard an interpretation of why the failure of neo-liberal policies around the world has become a source of growing support for the right, rather than for the left, both in terms of organized public debate and electoral politics. Here I can refer to my own essay on “democracy fatigue” (Appadurai 2019), in which I argued that the global swing to the right, at least about seven years ago, was at least in part an “exit” solution, in Albert Hirschman’s famous terminology (1970), where many voters in many democracies enacted their exhaustion with the slow, deliberative workings of liberal democracy and became susceptible to promises of fast and dramatic results from various right-wing demagogues. Neo-liberal policies, wherever

they come into play, tend to rely on various social engineering models which are more libertarian than liberal, since they are loathe to do any serious meddling with the market. In this sense neo-liberal policies rely on slow, long-term dynamics as part of their rhetoric for addressing poverty and inequality. This too plays into impatience with the slowness of neo-liberal policies. The Right plays on the personalized symptoms of market failure, the Left usually on the structural critique of causes, which excites only academics.

Finally, in this perspective, let me move outside Europe to better understand Europe, by briefly discussing the USA, India and Argentina.

Let me begin with Argentina, where a libertarian dark horse, Javier Milei, has swept to power, after a long history of liberal-left regimes in the country. Milei has a bizarre portfolio of views, from dollarizing the Argentine economy to liberalizing gun ownership, and is a climate change denialist and abortion opponent. Milei's base seems to be the newest generation of youth, now the drivers of an intergenerational consensus, fed up with the horrendous state of poverty, unemployment and inflation in Argentina. Milei's victory is a classic example of what I have elsewhere called "democracy fatigue", referring to the global impatience with the slow procedures of liberal democracy which fuel the support for autocrats who promise overnight prosperity and justice. Milei's bizarre libertarianism claims to offer an alternative to the neo-liberalism of the last decade in Argentina. But it is in fact neo-liberalism on steroids. His claim that his policies will cause pain in the short run but bring equity in the long run, is a version of the Western medicine administered in much of Eastern Europe by American triumphalists after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It appears to call for patience but the patience it calls for is not the patience of deliberative democracy but the patience demanded by patients in the emergency room. While no European right wing movement has ideologies as eccentric as Milei's, there is a strong streak of anger about failed neo-liberal promises across Europe as well.

What about the USA? The most striking fact about US politics in 2023 is the amazing resilience of Donald Trump, whose popularity has barely been dented by his demented speeches, documented crimes and endless courtroom confrontations. Conversely, Joseph Biden has gotten little credit for his economic victories, his careful foreign policy positions, and his humane style of interaction. His age and occasional lapses are held against him, even within his own party, whereas Trump's transparent dementia is treated as part of his persona. How does Trump maintain his

electoral credibility and his significant chances for re-election as President in 2024, in spite of his open contempt for elections, law, and even the Constitution? And what light does his persistent appeal cast on Europe's swing to the right? The European appeal of the Trumpist far-right is their appeal to an imaginary forgotten majority, who feel abandoned by globalization, by big power blocs and alliances, and by advocates of universal human rights and free movement. In the European case, the European Union is seen as both the regulatory Big Brother of genuine national units and as the major protector of the rights of migrants to Europe, even though even the liberal EU leadership is itself increasingly hostile to migration. In short, the politics of wounded ethnic majorities combines with generalized racism about internal and external others in the model adapted by the European right from Trump.

Finally, what about Modi's India? On the ground, Modi and his BJP party have won the recent state-level assembly elections in five states in India, with the results widely regarded as auguries for the national elections in 2024. Favors are being distributed, promises are being made, leaders are hurling invectives against each other, no chance for spectacle and promotion is being missed. Narendra Modi leads the star-spangled electoral drama hailing party's victories in these five elections.

The global audience, and the European electorate, is not much involved with the details of politics in India. It sees a glamorous Modi, leader of a resurgent India, a player in big league diplomacy with Russia, the USA, the Middle East and Australia. In the past year, he has had red carpet visits to France and Germany and on Bastille Day in France, he and Macron watched a ceremonial parade by representatives of the India Armed Forces, an unprecedented display of foreign military power on French soil. Modi is among the few world leaders to keep both Netanyahu and Prince Mohamed Bin Salman smiling in his company. The most vivid clue to Modi's role in Europe's swing to the Right is his photogenic relationship with Giorgia Meloni, which has become the subject of a lot of titillating humor in the Indian press, which spoofs the image of Melody (Modi and Meloni) as a pseudo-romantic duo. All this may be media noise. But Modi is important for Meloni because she is working hard to launder her party's clear-cut fascist history and to recast herself as a European stateswoman, especially by lining up with Israel and Ukraine. Modi's biggest success has been his success in insulating his highly xenophobic and anti-Muslims policies in India from his global image as the face of India's new role as a respectable and democratic world power. So, he is a valuable role model for European leaders like Meloni.

The geographical dots of the USA, Argentina and India are far from Europe, but in a world of swirling images and lightning-fast media messaging, Europe's swing to the right cannot be wholly explained by its direct struggles with migration, its long history of anti-Islam sentiments or even its sub-surface admiration of Putin's disdain for the USA, for NATO and especially for the EU. Trump's USA, Milei's Argentina and Modi's India are all signs of where a significant number of European politicians and parties are headed – back to closed borders, anti-Muslim policies, and nationalist skepticism about regional alliances. Geert Wilders rise in the Netherlands is a symbol of how the lunatic fringe can capture the political center, a dynamic that we can see across the length and breadth of Europe.

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