



POLICY BRIEF

The opening of Europe's Overton window

Thomas Wright

Formerly fringe ideas are now taking center stage in European politics, shrinking the space for centrism and traditional ideals.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, Europe's political discourse has expanded to include ideas that used to be on the fringe. The three most significant are Brexit, right-wing populism, and left-wing populism. Meanwhile, the old centrist consensus has shrunk and new divisions have emerged, particularly between Germany and France. The European Union and eurozone remain robust and are very unlikely to collapse but their future will be shaped by the new ideological environment, rather than by the traditional ideals associated with European integration.

It is frequently said that the European Union suffers from a democratic deficit owing to the lack of a European demos, but what is remarkable about the Union today is that Europe is a topic of fierce debate at both national and transnational levels, and the full tapestry of public opinion is on vivid display. Right-wing populists are in power in Austria,

Hungary, Poland, and Italy. Left-wing populists are in government in Greece and Italy. Britain is on its way out. Centrism seems to be making a comeback in France while the Greens compete with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to be the largest opposition party in Germany. EU policy toward immigration, the free movement of EU citizens, and the eurozone have become wedge issues, debated from Riga to Dublin, regularly deciding election outcomes. At the time of writing, speculation is rife about the European Parliament elections of May 2019, which could well see major gains by euroskeptic parties that would then be in a position to undermine the EU from within. It is a far cry from the days when the public seemed disengaged from the Union.

The late public policy scholar Joseph Overton lent his name to a concept, the Overton window, to describe the acceptable range of political discourse in a society—some ideas are so controversial that

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they will not be taken seriously. Europe's Overton window were narrowly ajar in the post-Cold War era. European politics was dominated by the center-left and center-right—they disagreed about tax and spending but agreed on globalization, the European Union, and open societies. The window opened wider over time, usually in response to policy failures, including the 2003 Iraq War, the 2008-09 financial crisis, and the 2015 refugee crisis. Disaffected citizens were open to new ideas, although few were initially on offer. Entrepreneurial politicians, often on the younger side, have taken advantage of this opportunity to develop new alternatives to the status quo. They have succeeded by using the technological tools provided by social media, which enable them to bypass traditional media. This heterogeneity of ideas is creating a real debate about the future of Europe, but many of them are radical and half-baked or incompatible with the rules of the European Union.

EUROPE'S RADICAL IDEAS

There have been at least three radical developments in Europe since 2008-09: Brexit's rise from fringe idea to reality, right-wing populism's rise to a post-war high point in parliamentary representation and political influence, and a rise in left-wing populism which threatened the eurozone in 2015 and could yet have dramatic impact given its foothold in Italy and the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, the old consensus has become internally divided—parts have fallen to one of the new ideas while what remains is split on the type of EU they seek.

Brexit

Leaving the European Union did not exist as a serious idea within the Conservative Party before 2008. Only a couple of members of parliament (MPs) advocated leaving the European Union. The British euroskeptics focused on preventing the U.K. from joining the euro and vetoing further integration. They argued that the EU had departed from its original mission. The word Brexit was

coined in 2012, taking inspiration from Grexit—the idea that Greece might leave the euro.¹ The eurocrisis did not directly lead to Brexit, but it did create an atmosphere in which it was possible to argue that the European economic project had failed. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won 2.2 percent of the vote in the 2005 general election and 3.1 percent in 2010. It made substantial gains in local elections in 2013 and 2014 and secured 27.5 percent in the European Parliamentary elections of 2014. It would win 12.6 percent of the vote in the 2015 general election (although it only won one seat because of the first-past-the-post electoral system). UKIP's demand for a referendum on EU membership won favor with a significant number of younger Conservative Party politicians. In 2011, 81 Conservative MPs defied the prime minister and backed a parliamentary motion calling for a referendum on EU membership. The combination of UKIP and internal party pressures persuaded then-Prime Minister David Cameron to promise a referendum in the hope of settling the Europe question for a generation. But things did not turn out that way—the British people voted to leave by 52 percent to 48 percent, due partly to controversies around immigration.² After the vote, the Brexit position moved in a more radical direction, to include leaving the single market and customs union, which prior to the crisis was what Conservative euroskeptics had defended.

Britain now has to live with the consequences. As Ivan Rogers, the former head of the U.K.'s negotiating team, put it in excruciating and eloquent detail in a series of lectures, Britain has locked itself into an indefinite series of negotiations with the EU at which it is at a distinct disadvantage.³ Contrary to its previous experience of being difficult inside the room, the U.K. government will find itself outside the room, unable to influence the decisionmaking process. The EU enjoys far greater leverage than Britain and will use it to exact painful concessions across a wide range of issues, including fisheries, services, and immigration. The border in Northern Ireland may remain frictionless, but relations

between the United Kingdom and the EU will be fraught with tension and will consume British politics for many years. No doubt the British people will interpret the EU's willingness to use its leverage and to protect its own interests as thwarting their democratically expressed desire to leave without paying a high price.

Right-wing populism

Right-wing populism has always been a feature of post-Cold War continental European politics, but usually struggled around the fringe. Jean Marie Le Pen made it to the second round of the French presidential election in 2002 but was annihilated in the second round. Right-wing populists have done much better since the financial crisis, thanks to two factors. The first is the public's concern about immigration, with the far right often being the first or only party to call for strict controls. The second is the eurocrisis, with the far right either blaming Germany or the debtor nations (right-wing populists in the core blame the debtor nations, and in the debtor nations, they blame the Germans). The populist right has used both to craft a coherent message that now transcends their origins (migration levels are at their lowest level since the crisis of 2015 when over a million refugees arrived in the EU, while feelings over the euro have abated for the time being). They now share power in Italy and Austria, and have made significant gains in Germany for the first time since World War II with the AfD winning 12.6 percent of the vote in the 2017 general election, which gained them 94 seats and made them the largest opposition party. In France, another Le Pen, Marine, flamed out in the second round although she fared considerably better than her father (34 percent compared to 18 percent).

While not all right-wing populists are authoritarian, some of them are. The poster child is Viktor Orbán, Hungary's one-time democratic revolutionary who has presided over the evisceration of democratic institutions in his country and now seeks a broader European role as the leader of a pan-European

right-wing populist front. Others, such as Poland's Law and Justice party, seem to be indulging in some of the same tactics, although they are at a much earlier stage and Poland's democracy remains intact.⁴ Right-wing populism has also empowered talented and entrepreneurial politicians who are willing and able to tap into old nationalisms and are likely to be with us for some time to come. Not all of these people will succeed, and some will marginalize themselves with extreme positions. But others will retain political power and influence. Consider for example, Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's Northern League. French analyst Marc Lazar writes that Salvini "presented himself as the herald of an Italian nation," defined "both in terms of ethnicity and culture" with the "pre-eminence of national sovereignty: Italians first" at its core.⁵ In France, at just 29, Marion Maréchal, Jean-Marie Le Pen's granddaughter and Marine's niece, has distinguished herself from her grandfather and aunt while dropping the family name, has spoken at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in the United States, and is poised to lead a new right in France organized around a rejection of the global economy and an embrace of traditional Christian values.⁶

In its democratic form, right-wing populism fundamentally challenges core principles of the European Union, including economic and political solidarity between the member states. In its authoritarian form, it rejects the most basic principle of the EU, which is the rule of law and democracy. Both are usually pro-Russian and anti-American.⁷ Thankfully it is not militaristic—an important distinction with Europe's past—but it promises to bring an end to Europe's role in upholding a liberal international order with the United States.

Left-wing populism

Prior to the eurocrisis, the post-Cold War center left embraced globalization and capitalization, as epitomized by Tony Blair's New Labour and Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 labor market and welfare

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reforms. Afterward, the center left was eviscerated, even though it played a vital role in averting a Great Depression. As my colleagues Célia Belin and Ted Reinert have written, the past decade has seen a crisis of the left throughout Europe, resulting in experimentation and different types of left-wing offerings.⁸ One consequence has been the rise of a more radical left. The first domino to fall was in Greece, where the center-left party the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) collapsed and the far-left party Syriza came from nowhere to narrowly lose out in the two general elections of 2012 and then gain power in 2015. Syriza succeeded on the back of a platform that rejected eurozone orthodoxy and promised to stand up to the European Central Bank and Germany. The result was an economic and political crisis that almost saw Greece crash out of the eurozone (only averted when Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras blinked at the last minute). The populist left also gained power in Italy when the Five Star Movement entered an unlikely coalition with the right-wing Northern League in 2018. Like Syriza, the Five Star-League coalition rejects eurozone orthodoxy, but it is yet to be seen whether it results in a similar crisis. There are similar parties and movements in Spain (Podemos), Germany (Left Party), and France (Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his latest vehicle, La France Insoumise).

Left-wing populism has also had surprising success in the United Kingdom. Jeremy Corbyn's 30-year career in British politics was as a dissident Labour Party MP who rejected the shift to the center and voted against his own whip over 500 times. He stood for the Labour leadership in 2015 because his colleague John McDonnell was in ill health and the younger socialist caucus in the party wanted one of their number to run. Against all expectations, he won. His politics were immensely unpopular in his parliamentary party but he survived a challenge in 2016 and then performed much better than expected in the general election of 2017, which solidified his position and control over his party. Corbyn is a skeptic of the EU and is widely believed to be sympathetic to the Brexit cause despite

voting to remain. His skepticism is rooted in a desire to take Britain in a more protectionist and socialist direction than allowed by EU law (including nationalizing industry). On foreign policy, he is deeply critical of NATO and has a long history of opposition to U.S. foreign policy.

Left-wing populism receives less attention than right-wing populism but is very consequential for several reasons. The first is that it has displaced the center left, completely destroying it in several cases. The second is that at its core, left-wing populism is incompatible with the euro. Syriza had to capitulate in 2015 because of Greece's size but it may be a different matter in Italy or France. Finally, left-wing populists tend to diverge significantly from traditional Atlanticism.

THE FATE OF THE OLD CONSENSUS

The old consensus of support for European integration, the eurozone, and globalization is still well-represented in the chancelleries of Europe but things are beginning to change. Since the center left and the center right dominated pre-crisis politics, they were not going to be dislodged after one election—it would take several. With the exception of Germany, after the first election, the governing party suffered major losses and the opposition party took over. After the second, they tended to go into coalition with large majorities. After the third, their majorities shrank or they lost power. In Germany, Merkel remained in power in the coalition but the collective weight of the center right and center left plummeted.

Both the center left and the center right are now engaged in important conversations about their future. The center right has in a number of cases—most notably, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz—sought to steal the clothes of right-wing populists, particularly on immigration. The center left has struggled to find a role, although it is increasingly focused on inequality and influenced by the work of the French economist Thomas Piketty.

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In Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) looks set for a period of continuity now that Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (known as AKK) has secured the leadership of the party, succeeding Chancellor Merkel. However, if she fails, it is likely that the torch could pass to someone (such as Health Minister Jens Spahn) determined to move the party to the right, not just on immigration but also on eurozone issues and foreign policy. In France, Emmanuel Macron won power by leaving the Socialist Party and embracing an unambiguous pro-EU position. But, he was also politically fortunate—in the first round of the 2017 presidential election he benefited from the scandals of the center-right party's candidate Francois Fillon and made it to the second round with 24 percent of the vote. He has also struggled to implement his agenda in office, partly because of the emergence of right-wing populism in the form of the Yellow Vest movement.

The most significant problem for the EU though is that the French and German centers are likely to fundamentally disagree about the type of eurozone they want. The French want fiscal integration, mutualization of liabilities, a proper banking union, and deficit-fueled investment. The Germans oppose these measures, are deeply suspicious of Keynesian macroeconomic ideas, and are committed to balanced budgets, national responsibility for bank debts, a hawkish European Central Bank, and the strictest interpretation of eurozone rules. The eurozone has had something of a reprieve from its crisis but it will return at some point, and when it does, the Franco-German divisions mean that the necessary repairs will not have been made.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE EU

The EU's broadening of its politics occurs in parallel to a dramatic change in its external environment. The United States was generally supportive of the EU until the Trump administration, which has begun to champion the cause of the nation state and the un-pooling of sovereignty. This has manifested itself in high-level interventions into European politics and

a pivot away from pro-EU Western European nations and toward the more skeptical nations of Eastern and Central Europe (Britain has fallen between two stools and has been largely ignored). Russian interference in EU politics has accelerated, including through a vast web of illicit finance and support for far-right groups. China has divided Eastern and Western Europe through its 16 + 1 format and has deepened its engagement in European politics through Belt and Road Initiative investment and through providing technological platforms such as 5G, raising fears of Chinese infiltration of critical infrastructure.

The question from an analytical perspective is: How will all of this play out? What will happen to the European Union and to Europe more broadly? Will there be a major change in European democracy that unlocks its politics? Will the EU break into smaller blocks, allowing for a multi-tier Europe? And, what will happen to Europe's geopolitical orientation—will it remain a champion of the liberal international order and the trans-Atlantic alliance or will it become more independent, working with China and Russia as well as the United States?

The increasing heterogeneity of ideas about Europe's future creates a series of significant clashes and contradictions. Any change will have to work around these constraints; it cannot wish them away. In other words, the future of the EU will by political necessity reflect some of the elements of these new political ideas as well as the Franco-German division within the traditional consensus. Where these ideas directly contradict each other, they will be determined by the political balance of power. So one could imagine a scenario with an EU that is tough on immigration and tolerant of anti-democratic practices (appeasing right-wing populists) but also economically protectionist (appeasing the left as well as elements on the right), while also embracing German ideas of fiscal and financial union. An analysis of European politics leads to the conclusion that this is more likely than a transformation of the EU along the lines proposed by Macron, which would run into opposition on multiple fronts.

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Europe's geopolitical orientation depends in large part on the United States, which has experienced its own opening of the Overton window. If Washington continues to reduce its engagement in Europe and/or opposes European integration, European nations will likely pursue their own sovereign interests. But that will mean they are less Atlanticist and more open to transactional cooperation with China, Russia, and others. If the United States seeks to deepen ties with the EU on a new set of shared challenges—including technology, China, and defending against political interference—it is possible, but not guaranteed, that Europe will remain committed to the trans-Atlantic relationship.

The EU is experiencing traumatic and historic political changes. These ideas seem to be distasteful but they also appear to be politically durable. As we have seen in the cases of Greece in 2015 and Brexit today, the EU is quite robust and is hard to leave. It will not collapse. But the type of EU that emerges is uncertain. It may take a very different turn than its supporters want and expect.

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